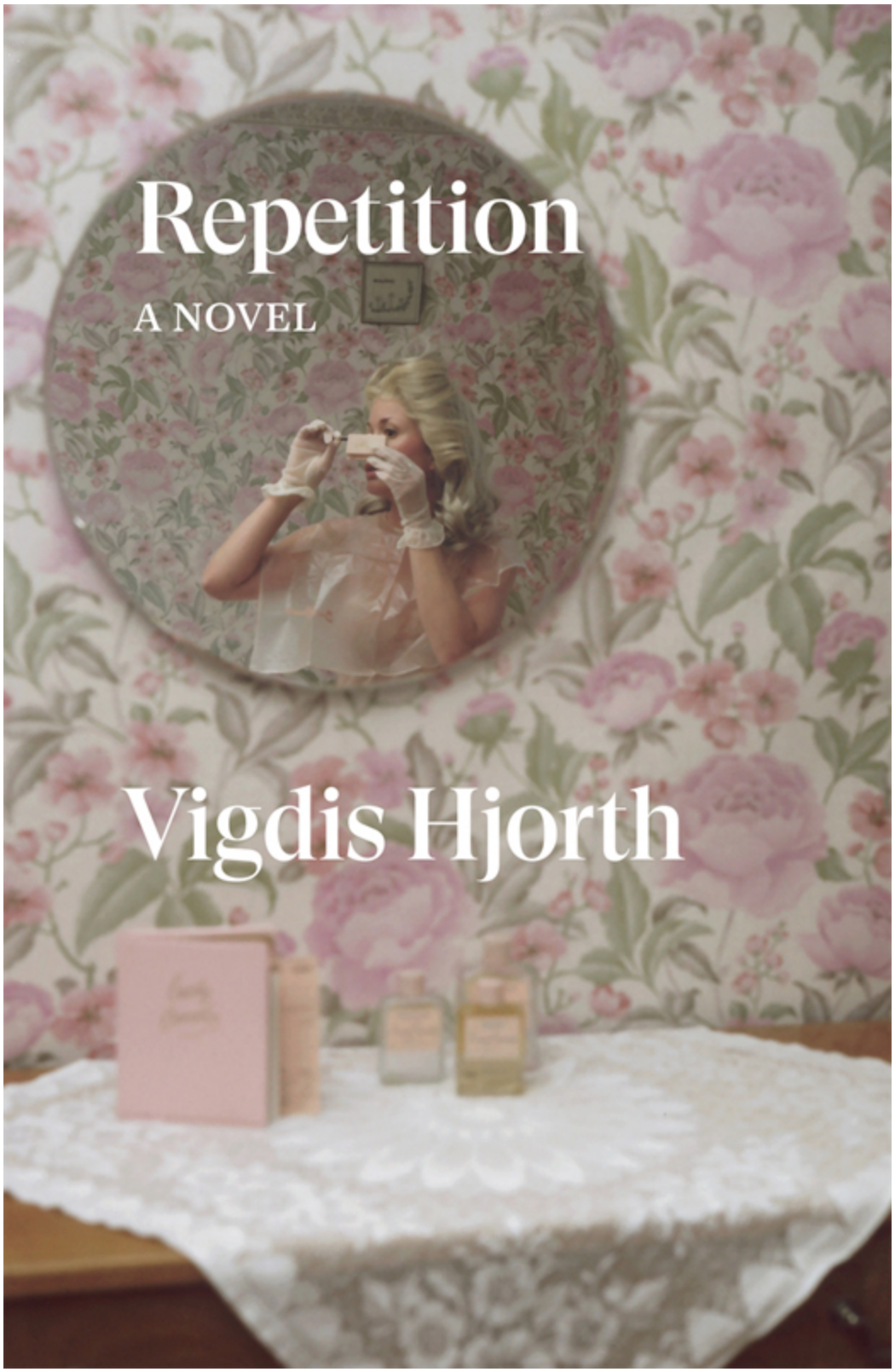
Repetition

A NOVEL

Vigdis Hjorth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A novel
by
Vigdis Hjorth

Translated by Charlotte Barslund

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contact@logoseurope.eu

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Anything you want to forget will come back to you, it will haunt you so vividly that it feels as if you're going through it all over again, often causing you the same overwhelming and unmanageable feelings as it did the first time; you fear the intensity might kill you and so you fight its return, you resist, but you can't prevent or shield yourself from the pain that follows and so you are forced to relive it. However, when it has been re-experienced and relived yet again, when the paralysing pain subsides, you will often find that you have gained a fresh insight into the significance of that particular memory; it was the reason it came back, in order to tell you something.

Why do I write you when I mean me?

It was late November, it was dark in the morning when I woke up and it would be dark again by four o'clock in the afternoon, and if I were to step outside the place where I was, a small cabin deep in Nordmarka, a large, forested area surrounding Norway's capital, I wouldn't be able to see my own hand in front of me.

I usually retreated to this simple cabin after busy periods of activities such as events and literary festivals, in order to rest, to read, to catch up on sleep and to dream. I had travelled the length and breadth of the country that autumn talking about the relationship between the novel and real life, a theme that had accompanied me all the years I had written fiction and which I was used to discussing, but I had started to feel increasingly lost and subdued. I would often stay silent and during the last event I wondered if I was losing my mind.

I'd spent a week in the cabin and had been hoping to stay there for longer in order to read, to catch up on sleep and to dream, but the University of Oslo Symphony Orchestra was giving its annual carol concert and I had promised a friend, who plays the viola, to go. Besides, I had just read that

repetition is the whole point of life, that repetition is the daily bread of life, its blessing fills you up, and seeing as I had attended the orchestra's carol concert for three years in a row, I hoped that it would indeed prove to be a blessing. I made preparations to leave the following morning and so ended up taking the dog for a walk later than usual, in the early twilight. We walked through the forest to the unlit road we normally follow up to the point where we can see stretches of the long Steinsfjord below us. The cabins we passed were locked down, it was outside the season, but even so I rarely saw other people there; in some of the old cabins on the ridge behind me, I had never seen any lights at all.

We had turned to head back when darkness fell, first gradually, then suddenly, I couldn't even see my own hand when I held it up to my face. My dog, however, carried on undaunted, she had a flashing LED light on her collar and if it hadn't been for that, I might well have ended up crawling along the verge between the road and the forest. So I followed her and because I couldn't see anything, my sense of hearing was heightened, I believe, by the rhythm of her paws against the road, her steady breathing and the faint susurration of the wind in the tall pines. After three quarters of an hour or so, she turned into what must be the path to the cabin; I had switched off the lights before we left and it lay in a darkness that humbled you. I followed her with some hesitation so as not to trip over any stones and roots, and when she finally stopped, I was able to make out the doorstep in the red light from her collar and I sat down on it. There was no moonlight, no stars, it was as dark as underground, we breathed darkness, the dog's senses attuned to the forest, mine were listening to my thoughts where something was stirring, rising from the deep, but it slipped away before I could grasp it, like a night-time dream dissolves when you try to recall it while at the same time the sensation of the dream will linger in your body as if it were a physical experience, this was one of anxiety and gloom. I unlocked the door to let us in and we went to bed, but I couldn't sleep, I tossed and turned all night until I dozed off in the early-morning hours and

dreamed I was a young girl and I noticed that I had a big gash in my side, a cut that could have been made by a knife or a pair of scissors, and I thought that I ought to clean it with antiseptic, I showed it to my mother and asked if she had any antiseptic. She didn't seem interested, but she would check, she said, and left, but she didn't come back, she must have forgotten. Then I spotted an arrow on the ground, I picked it up and it turned out to be a pen. I woke up with a pounding heart because this dream was a variation on a recurring theme and also a warning. I got up and took the dog for a walk, I didn't know what else to do, I walked for a long time in the grey, wet fog with a feeling of suffering from unrequited love, but without an object for my restless longing.

I packed my things and tidied up and when we drove down the steep hills from Ringkollen to Klekken, it started to snow. Large snowflakes twirled slowly in front of my windscreen and headlights and made it hard to see and driving on the unlit, narrow, winding road demanded my full attention; soon the world would be dazzling, white and glittering, and anything sharp and pointy would be smoothed over. It was something that happened every year at this time, it recurred, and repetition is the whole point of life. Hope is like a new garment – stiff, tight and glittering – but until you try it on, you won't know if it fits or suits you, while memory is like an old garment: no matter how pretty it is, it no longer suits you, you've outgrown it. Repetition, however, is like a durable garment that hugs you tenderly, but never constricts or swamps you. I was glad that I hoped for nothing, but why then this feeling of dread?

It was dark again when I reached Sandvika because no snow had fallen here as it had on higher ground. I took the exit east to Oslo rather than west to Kristiansand and Nesøya as I usually did, joined the main road and became a part of the heavy Sunday-afternoon traffic crawling with agonising slowness towards the city centre, at long last I was able to park underneath the concert hall and I walked through windy, Sunday-empty streets towards

the main entrance, past glum figures wrapped up in heavy parkas and dark scarves, bracing themselves against the icy wind. As I approached the hall I saw several people waiting on the steps outside, the doors were not yet open so we had to wait and waiting is a challenge, especially in the cold, I hoped the time would pass quickly. We hope time will pass quickly. We have but one single life on this earth, a split second of earthly existence in the endless expanse of time, and yet we don't feel that it can pass quickly enough. Yes, I get it. It is hard to live your life in a way that matches that knowledge, perhaps it is impossible. I positioned myself so that no one could see my face, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and told myself that all was well, I could sense the presence of my irritating, mortal fellow human beings, their breathing and the sounds they made when they moved, when they tried to keep warm by rubbing their arms, shifting their weight from one foot to another, how they moved up the steps as more people arrived, the queue compacted and it grew more crowded around the entrance, their impatience and their fears. There are no people anywhere else, only here on our little planet; there may well be plenty of intelligent life out there, but there are no people, not in any of the billions of galaxies, we are a rare and threatened species, and so wicked towards one another. I heard a metallic click, I opened my eyes and saw the heavy doors glide open before I entered as one of the first.

The instruments were set out on the stage; I took a seat where I could see the viola, in the third row to the left, the same seat where I had sat the year before, another repetition. The audience surged in, but spoke quietly just like last year, this space commanded solemnity. We began to warm up, some people took off their coats, there were couples and pensioners, families with young children, an adult daughter with an old mother, an adult son with his parents and so on, I alone was on my own. Young children climbed onto their parents' laps, it made me emotional, I never went to a concert as a child, it wasn't in my blood, how might my life have turned out if I had been to a concert as a child and it had been in my blood? Then

perhaps what happened next wouldn’t have brought back the memory. There were empty seats to my right, a man stopped, behind him was a woman, behind her a girl aged fifteen or sixteen, their daughter, I thought, the invisible bonds vibrated. The man tapped the daughter’s shoulder and pointed to the seats, she nodded and went to sit next to me, her mother followed, then her father, there was just enough room for them, they were so close that I could feel the girl’s padded jacket against my arm, she wasn’t happy. I couldn’t insulate myself against her unhappy presence, she didn’t want to be there, she had been forced to come, squeezed in between her mother and a strange woman, she stared at the programme while her mother looked at her with disapproval because she wasn’t happy, because she wasn’t grateful, her mother exchanged knowing glances with the father, no matter what they did, the girl wasn’t happy, she refused to be happy, she stared at the programme in mute protest. At six o’clock the doors were closed, the lights dimmed, the musicians entered, I waved to the viola player, the hum in the auditorium died down. The conductor took a bow, everything was silence and anticipation, the hands of the girl next to me with her eyes on the programme trembled as did mine, the conductor turned to the orchestra, raised the baton and the music began.

Carols from northern Norway, *Blessed be the day over the fjords, Blessed be the light over the land*, the girl’s mother wriggled out of her coat, pulled off the Burberry check scarf around her neck, folded it on her lap and patted it with restless hands, she didn’t want to be there either, she was there for the girl’s sake, but the girl wasn’t grateful. The father had bought expensive tickets so the family could have a nice time together before Christmas, but the girl wasn’t happy. *God’s peace upon the mountain and hill, God’s peace upon the beasts in the stall*. The mother leaned towards the girl and whispered: Take off your jacket, she pinched her through it, bowed down to her ear, elbowed her, whispered more loudly: Take off your jacket. The girl closed her eyes, her mother hissed her name, my name, a hard sound, but the girl didn’t want to take off her jacket, she was hiding inside it and that

was why her mother wanted her to take it off, draw her out from her hiding place, her shelter, *We are unyielding, just like you, You bless with eternal words, The people who live here in the north*, we clapped, the girl didn't. Her mother glanced at the father who shook his head. *O holy night*, I was mesmerised. The mother tugged at the girl's jacket, harder this time, now closer to her, intruding on her personal space, why was that jacket so important? Because it had turned into a battle which the mother had to win. The girl unzipped the jacket, her mother yanked at a sleeve, her parents paid the bills, they paid for her keep although it couldn't cost them much given how thin she was, but they had paid for her jacket and could make demands, and no one else, the friends I hoped she had, was there, she was forced to be alone with her parents and for their benefit at the University Symphony Orchestra's carol concert so that her parents could exercise their power and feel reassured. Something had happened, something terrible had happened the week before which had to be fixed, which had to be mended, her parents needed it to be. The mother's threatening gaze and a sudden gesture from the father that signalled: Take off that damn jacket! The girl slowly peeled the padded jacket off her left shoulder with her right hand, her elbow came near my elbow, she eased the jacket over her right shoulder using her left hand, but she didn't pull her arms out of the sleeves and the jacket wound up stretched across her back, half off half on, like a weird straitjacket. She bowed her head towards the programme and closed her eyes, I could see that she was crying. She was trapped and paralysed and she couldn't stay where she was without breaking, but neither did she have anywhere to go or anyone to turn to, she was fifteen or sixteen years old and dependent. I wanted to put my arm around her and whisper in her ear that everything would be alright, but I couldn't know that, it probably wouldn't be, it didn't look like it, and nothing I could say would take away her pain, *Lovely is the earth*. I could do nothing for her and even if I could, it wouldn't have made any difference because the people she longed to be understood by, the ones on whom her anxious hope was pinned, were her parents. *Generations will follow the course of generations*, and we are tied to our family from our first breath to our last, and the last carol had been played and we clapped

and stood up and the girl pulled her jacket back over her shoulders and they walked out in front of me, three lost, unhappy people, hopelessly entangled. Concert-goers pushed and shoved impatiently from all sides because life couldn't happen fast enough and I lost sight of them in the crowd. The musicians had gone backstage, but I didn't join them to say hello to the viola player, instead I stepped out into the cold and the dark while the girl continued to prey on my mind and I didn't go to the island where my house is as I had planned, but drove back to the woods because Grøndals vei had returned to me, my last November in the first-floor flat in Grøndals vei came back, the place where I had spent my formative years, so to speak, a lower-middle-class area on the lower side of Tåsenveien. On the upper side of the mighty Tåsenveien were smart villas with large gardens while on the lower side were smaller houses with smaller gardens and several terraced houses and below them again the housing blocks for workers from the nail factory. On my first day of school we were asked to draw the place where we lived; later I wondered if that was because our drawings would tell our teacher a great deal about each child's socio-cultural background, as I guess you would call it today.

November 1975. I was sixteen years old and my mother worried about me. It had started a few years earlier, when I turned fourteen and got my period, my mum started to worry about me. It worsened when I turned fifteen, when I developed breasts, mum became even more worried about me and her fears mushroomed with every week, with every month. She worried that I might start smoking, drinking, sleeping around, go off the rails, go to the dogs, and her anxiety was contagious, she must have spotted something in me that meant I really was at risk of going off the rails, of going to the dogs, indeed I was starting to believe it myself. She worried that I would succumb to teenage temptations, deadly drugs from America, she feared that I might become addicted to them, sleep around and get pregnant and bring shame upon myself. I wondered if she suspected some kind of darkness in me and she made me suspect it too. She watched me like a hawk for signs of the

beginning of the end, soon I was doing the same and that was how I learned anxious self-reflection. She would stand by the kitchen window waiting for me when I came home from school, when I came back from my friend Unni's or from athletics practice; I would approach the house and see her in the window and my heart would sink and I dreaded it, but I had nowhere else to go, through the gate, through the entrance door, up the stairs to the first-floor flat where she would be waiting. I could visit my friends Unni or Helle, but ultimately I had no choice but to go home and then, which was worse, the interrogation would begin – sooner when I had been with Unni or Helle than when I had been to athletics practice, because I might be lying about my absence and I might really have been elsewhere, with someone else, with boys, how could she ever be sure? Was there something I wasn't telling her? What was it? What was it? She would come up close to see if she could smell smoke or something else, while I could smell her fear, that unique smell of fear, and I grew scared of whatever it was in me that terrified her desperate, darting eyes so much. Whatever I said was wrong, it merely sowed doubt and more anxiety, it didn't calm her, it didn't reassure her, her fear was too great. She suffered from a terrible anxiety created by her own fear and she couldn't rationalise or cope with it and then she would get angry with the person who triggered her unmanageable emotions, while at the same time she could not remove the cause, me. There was a frantic quality to her which I didn't understand, but which I had to deal with day after day, week after week, I had to explain and defend myself and I tried to quell her fears and the rage her fears produced, which was directed at me, but I failed, no matter what I said it only made things worse: *You just don't understand, it breaks my heart!* My teenage years revolved around my mother's breaking heart.

I would reel off the reasons why she needn't be afraid: I was doing well at school and at sports, I didn't go partying at weekends, I spent every Saturday in my room, alone or with Unni, occasionally I would visit Helle, something my mum hated because Helle was in the year above Unni and

me, and so a year closer to potential corruption. I didn't understand her insanity, but I appeared to contribute to it merely by existing. It was obvious that she was hurting and going out of her mind, she had capitulated to her fears and perhaps I should have felt compassion towards her and perhaps I did feel a kind of compassion towards her deep in the recesses of my mind, but I couldn't allow myself to feel that compassion or act on it because it required a surfeit of generosity I didn't have towards someone I had to protect myself against more than anyone else because she intruded on my boundaries constantly, probably without realising it. I didn't have the capacity to comfort someone who accused me of being the cause of their suffering, who claimed – and indeed believed – that it was my behaviour that caused her pain and for that reason she had become obsessed with my conduct, my actions, even the most trivial, and she never stopped looking for signs that there was something in me that might prompt me to do the very things she feared. I was unable to reassure her of my innocence, present and future, and so she hated me and nagged on and on at me, and it felt as if she wanted to get under my clothes and under my skin and into my head in order to read my mind to learn what triggered her unbearable fear, but as that was impossible, she invented her own version of me instead. Her fear created me because fear and imagination go together.

I wonder if my mother ever realised that her obsession with my budding sexuality contributed to sexualising me. Or did she fear to confirm her suspicions that I had already been sexualised and about how this had happened? It is not until now, belatedly, that I understand that the way she looked at me and her fear of my potential actions told me something crucial about myself which I would probably have taken longer to uncover had it not been for her, that she watered a seed which had already been planted, she watered what had already happened, the past, the repressed past, yet at the same time it was ever-present, her terror paved the way for the very realisation she would later come to fear so deeply. Thanks, mum.

She had cause to worry. She suspected – or she did in fact know – more about me and what had happened to me than I did. In some ways she was insightful and yet she invented her own version of me, and her primary motive wasn't an understandable fear of the damage I might inflict on myself, but of the damage I might indirectly end up inflicting on her, a fear that I might inadvertently or deliberately reveal, God forbid, that I had a wound which the world might accuse her of not having prevented, that she was a mother who had failed to protect me the way a mother should protect her child.

The rest of my family, my father and my three siblings, were also tired of our arguments, our clashes, though my mother was always more restrained when they were at home and so I always hoped they would be there when I came back and for that reason I'd delay coming home in the hope that they would be in, but it was a tricky balancing act because the later I returned, the more time mum had had to come up with stories of what I might have been up to while she was waiting. So even if my dad and my siblings were present, she would still get hysterical because she couldn't control herself or whatever it was that set her off. I dragged out my walk back from school praying that not only my younger sisters but also my dad and my big brother would be home when I got back because if she started then, my brother would leave and my dad would shout out from the living room: Oh, leave the girl alone, and mum would press her lips shut and I would go to my room. But later she would knock on my door, open it, stand in the doorway and accuse me of being the cause of all her worries before bursting into tears, apologising and telling me about her distress and then offering me an item of jewellery if I promised not to drink alcohol, not to smoke, not to try drugs and I promised and I took the jewellery, a bracelet, a necklace or a ring in return for being left alone, but the next day the same thing would happen, hysteria and screaming and arguing, and she didn't understand that she fed what she was trying to prevent, that her fears and the promises she forced me to make homed in on and pointed to something

I wanted deep down, something I desired, I felt an urge to defy her, trespass against her and what she represented without knowing it, I felt a dawning fearlessness and came to realise that I might be capable of doing *anything* should the opportunity present itself, except it didn't. Every Saturday I would sit in my room with Unni and listen to love songs. It was mum's realisation of my lack of opportunity that ultimately calmed her down.

I turned sixteen the summer before I was due to start upper secondary school and I would be going to the college with students from all over town, and then what? Mum was dreading autumn the whole summer before the new school year started, she talked about it incessantly and with growing unease because she may have sensed that I was not as timid as I used to be, that I had discovered some free will of my own as a result of her fear, an urge to defy her as a result of her worries, that I'd developed a level of self-awareness that made me swear that I would never allow myself to be as limited by my fears as she was. She was afraid of my growing fearlessness, but she no doubt envied it too, and I would soon learn that the combination of fear and envy is explosive.

Now, however, it was summer and holiday time and I was going to our cabin with my family. My parents had been able to afford a cabin because my father was enterprising and industrious and wanted to get on in life and hoped that one day, one day in the not-too-distant future, he could move the family from the first-floor flat in the lower-middle-class area between Tåsenveien and the housing blocks where the workers from the nail factory lived, to a detached house with its own garden on the upper side of Tåsenveien. He worked hard and long days, also during the summer, but he would join us at weekends bringing food and wine for him and my mother, my mother would put on a pretty dress and my father would don an apron and take charge of the barbecue. It was best when we were all there, when there were six of us so I could hide among the others. Being on my own with mum was the worst, but being on my own with my father was also

bad, it hardly ever happened, we avoided it, I understand that now many years later. Once he was about to carry some new fenders down to the boat and called out to my brother who didn't reply, who wasn't there, then my mum told me to help him, as if it was a test. She gave me two fenders and I took them, my dad turned and started walking and I followed him, feeling mum's eyes on my back. We walked in total silence down the path through the scrub and over the mound and across the shingle to the jetty, and once I had set down the fenders next to the boat, I ran back immediately with my heart in my throat and I felt really sorry for him because I couldn't think of anything to say to him. Then he returned to the city and we settled into a sleepy summer routine. I dreamed myself away all summer, all summer I lost myself in Reader's Digest books in the cabin, dramatic accounts of supposedly real-life love stories and tales of people who had survived shipwrecks and been forced to spend weeks in tiny boats on big oceans or on desert islands without food or water, their situation was worse than mine, it was important to keep a sense of perspective. All summer I escaped by writing letters to Unni, I made my family's boring cabin life seem more entertaining than it was, I enhanced our exchanges, I dramatised our small interactions, I put combative words into the mouths of my siblings, I wrote that I was looking forward to starting college and meeting new boys and possibly acquiring a boyfriend, I conjured up my new life as an upper-secondary student in my letters to Unni, and no harm was done because she simply replied with 'same here'. Mum was welcome to read the letters from Unni, I had a feeling that she did just that when I walked the six kilometres to the shop. Had they contained anything that might make her angry or upset, I would have thrown them away, but then she would have looked for but not found them and she would have realised that I had thrown them away and she would wonder why I had done that. What had Unni written that made me want to throw away her letters? But it was fine that Unni merely replied 'same here', and perhaps Unni did that because she knew what my mum was like.

Autumn arrived and with it my anxiety because it had merely slept, merely been in summer hibernation, now it resurfaced because my mum had infected me with hers all too successfully. I could feel anxiety in my chest, but also the passion my mum sensed, feared and envied, a desire and a will to break free and to do so emphatically, but I was also scared of these feelings because of what they might lead to and I understood that I must not show them to anyone, not to mum or to anyone else, that they would frighten people off, after all, they frightened me when I suspected what I might be capable of and so I feared the alcohol I had never tasted, the drugs I had never taken, the fall I could feel myself drawn to.

I started at Berg College with teenagers from other areas of the city, people mum didn't know, and this intensified her anxiety, the interrogations, the arguments.

At Berg College couples would make out in the schoolyard during breaks. We pretended to ignore them, but we watched them all the time, I watched them all the time. As I look back all these years later, I realise the couples were fully aware of their power to command our attention, they probably wouldn't have stood there with arms wrapped around each other, making out during every single break, had it not been for their attentive audience. Mona from my year started going out with Harald, who was a senior, he refused to wear a condom so Mona had to start taking the pill in order not to get pregnant, she had to take the pill every day at the exact same time, at twelve noon during our lunch break, the blister pack foil crackled when she popped it out. Harald lived alone in a bedsit in Majorstua, Mona would often spend the night with him and talked about it freely because for her it was straightforward. They would undress face to face in Harald's bedsit and caress each other's bodies and touch each other in unmentionable places, and it was all beyond me, I would never be able to do it and I imagined everything I would never be able to do in great detail and in slow motion while my heart trembled. Harald's penis becoming erect at the sight of a

naked Mona lying on a bed or a sofa or the floor and Harald lying down on top of her and inserting his erect penis into her vagina and moving his hips back and forth against her hips, thrusting his erect penis in and out of her vagina with increasing speed and finally losing control until he came. I had seen mating dogs do that hip thrust and it was my only source of reference – apart from the porn magazines the boys stashed in the forest and which I would study in depth whenever I got the chance, whenever I was alone, and which put the girl I was into a feverish state.

Harald came, Harald had an orgasm, and then he would roll over on his side and they would lie in the bed or on the sofa or on the floor and talk about normal stuff like homework and teachers and what they were going to have for dinner before they would get up and put their clothes back on and go out or clean their teeth and go to bed and sleep and wake up in the morning and eat breakfast and then go to college as if it was a completely normal way to behave.

I wouldn’t be able to do it. I didn’t know why, but I knew that I wouldn’t be able to, I wouldn’t be able to manage it, and that was why I so desperately wanted it.

It was different for my friends, I understood, I could see – not because we discussed such things, well I certainly didn’t, I don’t believe I gave away with one word or with my facial expression what was on my mind, what was burdening me, no, I knew it was different for them because I studied them furtively. I observed their faces when we went to the cinema or watched television, I noted their reactions in the schoolyard when the boys told crude jokes, I paid attention to their words and tone of voice when we were alone in Unni’s flat in the housing block behind the corner shop where the workers from the nail factory lived, and especially when she brought out her dad’s porn magazines and flicked through them on the kitchen table. The blood would rise to my face, a surge of shame, while Unni and Helle

brazenly read out the strange coarse comments in the speech bubbles and giggled at the swollen, red, purple, hairy or shaven genitalia, and luckily they were so fascinated by it all that they didn't notice the state I was in. At home my mum was waiting.

My mother criticised my verb endings. She asked me why I had started saying waitin', talkin', stoppin', was it to sound tough, was it to wind her up? Why do I remember this now? Is it because I am getting closer to the girl I once was?

Unni went on a weekend camping trip organised by the TUC Youth Association and turned up at school the following Monday morning with a new spring in her step and a rather smug, knowing face. They had secretly drunk beer in the cabin and played hide-and-seek in the dark and when she crawled under a bed to hide, a boy was already lying there and in the darkness and silence under the bed they had kissed with their tongues and the boy had slipped his hand down her trousers and rubbed her pussy. She had let it happen, she had wanted it, she nodded when we asked her. Helle complained that nothing exciting ever happened in her life and that she would have liked to join the TUC Youth Association if only her parents would let her – whereas I wouldn't have wanted to join even if my parents had been willing – and yet there was something liberating about the casual way in which Unni told us, her choice of words, it was different from the strange language in her dad's porn magazines. She would see the boy again at the association's next meeting and the morning after that meeting, she entered the schoolyard with the same, new, slightly swaggering gait because he had walked her to the bus stop when she was going home and they had tongue-kissed behind the bus shelter and then . . . she said, smiling coyly and looking down so we understood that he had done the same behind the bus shelter as he had under the bed and possibly more. I studied her furtively, she had grown prettier and more relaxed, she shrugged her satchel

off her shoulders, tossed her suddenly much shinier blonde hair and then sat down. His name was Lars.

It was a cold and dark November. But Unni lit up the mornings when she had been behind the bus shelter with Lars the night before, she was no longer coy, she didn't look away when she talked about it, she was in control. Lars was having a party on Saturday and we were invited, but my head and heart were dominated by mum, Unni knew it and had come up with a plan. She was turning sixteen on the Monday, but wanted to celebrate it on the Saturday, and my mum couldn't very well ban me from going to my best friend's birthday. Nor did she, I asked her when my dad and brother were present, I was to be home by eleven.

Saturday 8 November and I was on tenterhooks right from the morning. I was scared that mum's intense scrutiny would spot my lie or that I might accidentally give myself away by saying or doing something so I decided to go out and stay out most of the day in order to avoid it. My hands were shaking as I got dressed, I pressed my ear against the door, I couldn't hear anything so I opened it and I forced myself to walk rather than run though I desperately wanted to so as not to suggest any kind of urgency, then I called out into the kitchen that I was going into town to buy Unni a present. I walked down the stairs with studied calm and my heart pounding in my throat, out the door and through the gate without turning to see if she was standing in the window, but I thought I could feel her eyes on the back of my neck so I tried to stroll as indifferently and casually as I could and not as if I was planning a crime. I took the long way to the shopping centre in order to pass the time, I bought a shimmer lipstick at the chemist's and had it wrapped in shiny red paper with a gold ribbon, I visited all the other shops to kill time until it started to grow dark which it did as early as four o'clock, and by four o'clock it was dark and the darkness protected me on my return journey which I dragged out. Mum couldn't see me if I avoided the pools of light cast by the streetlamps. When I got nearer I avoided them,

when I was almost home I stayed close to the neighbouring fence and looked up at the light in the kitchen window where I could see mum's shadow pass from time to time, every now and again she would look out – for me, I thought, but perhaps she was looking out for my brother. I went through the gate, through the entrance door and up the stairs, and mum came out on the landing when she heard my footsteps on the stairs and eyed me suspiciously, but I held up the present as evidence and told her what was inside, I wasn't lying. I didn't know Unni was so vain, she said, who is Unni tarting herself up for, she said, I tried to smile and I managed it, she hesitated. I smiled again, it worked, her eyes flitted slightly and I went to my room, calmly, and closed the door behind me. Once on the other side I stopped and listened out, I was convinced she was standing just as close to the door as I was, on the other side. I hummed briefly to myself, loud enough for her to hear, but as innocently as someone with a clear conscience would hum. She must have heard, she returned to the kitchen, I didn't hear it, I felt it.

I didn't get changed in my room. Instead I threw a nice blouse into my bag, added some make-up, but left the make-up bag itself behind on my desk as evidence, I practised tongue-kissing on my hand, I brushed my hair while I looked at myself in the mirror and leaned towards it slowly while listening out for any sounds from the passage, then I met the mirror with my lips, I moved my tongue over its cool surface, it felt good. I put on my coat, slung my bag over my shoulder and opened the door when it was time to leave, mum came out into the passage and took a long, hard look at me, but what could she say, my dad was home, he was sitting in the kitchen with a cup of coffee and his newspaper, but he was watching us. Yet still she asked me who else was going, and I said that Helle and I would be there as would Unni's cousin from Odalen and then I smiled, it worked, she didn't ask any more questions. I went down the stairs, through the gate and crossed the common to reach Unni's flat behind the corner shop in the cold, in the darkness, on slightly shaky legs, now worried what might happen should

mum decide to call Unni tonight because there would be no one there to pick up the phone, Unni's parents had gone to Odalen, and then what would she do? I tried to calm down, telling myself she was unlikely to do so, that dad would stop her, but not only did I feel scared, I also felt scared of feeling scared, I feared that mum's anxiety had taken up residence inside me for good, that it would live in me forever and that I would always be as highly strung as she was. I couldn't explain to Unni how deep it went, I didn't understand it myself, I realise that now, in the cabin in the forest, forty-eight years later, how deep it went, how deep it goes. Unni wouldn't have understood because she hadn't seen my mother in action, my mother shouting hysterically, desperately, furiously banging on my door when I managed to get behind it in time to close it and lean my whole body against it. Unni thought my mother worried about me like most mothers worry about their daughters, they feared they might be raped or attacked by strangers, but what my mother was afraid of was what *I* might end up doing of my own free will. But I was incapable of explaining this, I couldn't even explain it to myself, I felt it strongly, but I couldn't articulate it, and even if I had found the words, Unni wouldn't have understood them because her circumstances were radically different from mine. I walked alone through the cold, dark streets to the housing block where Unni lived behind the corner shop on Maridalsveien on 8 November 1975. I entered the block and walked up to the second floor where I saw Helle's shoes on the mat, I pressed my ear against the door and I heard laughter coming from inside, Unni's older sister had bought beer for us. Drinking alcohol in secret on the TUC Youth Association cabin trip had been fun, now they sat in there drinking and my stomach lurched because I couldn't be as carefree as them. I rang the bell, they opened the door and I tried hard to hide my gloom in order not to infect them with it because they were having a good time and drinking alcohol as if it was a straightforward thing to do. Unni passed me a bottle of beer and I had a flashback to mum's face distorted with fear and rage and yet I took it, or perhaps that was exactly why I took it, and I raised the bottle to my lips in order to spite mum and I drank deep, I drank in big gulps and experienced a soothing warmth and I drank more and I felt how

the beer made me feel the way I ought to feel without beer, it suppressed my racing heart that sat in my throat, it made it possible for me to laugh although I suspected that it might also make me cry, but more than anything it took me to a place where terror could no longer reach me. We caught the bus down to a part of town where we had never been before, we walked through unfamiliar streets and my fear of things I couldn't control came back. Helle and Unni, too, became more subdued because moods are contagious and the one who feels most strongly is the most contagious, and that person was me. Snow had fallen while we'd been drinking, white snow that had settled and made everything seem softer and brighter than before, and every sound could be heard more clearly because snow affects sound like water does, when we got closer we could hear music and we walked towards it. Yet we hesitated when we were nearly there, we hesitated on the steps to the terraced house before Unni made up her mind and rang the bell, and after what felt like a long time the door was opened by Lars with whom she had been making out behind the bus shelter, and I was afraid to look him in the eye because of what I could imagine when I saw him. He gave Unni a hug as if it was the most natural thing in the world, then he said hello to Helle and to me, but he didn't shake our hands, he led the way into a living room where lots of people were standing on the floor and many more were sitting on sofas around a coffee table covered with beer bottles and ashtrays, it was mainly boys who were smoking. The smoke hung heavily over the coffee table, but it wafted towards me so the smell would probably stick to my clothes and hair, and mum came to mind, going home came to mind and I wanted to forget about mum and going home and so I took the bottle of beer that Lars was offering me. There were more people from the TUC Youth Association here, there was a boy called Stein, another called Finn, we said hi to each other, but we didn't shake hands, I continued to stay close to Unni and the people she knew. I drank quickly, I was so thirsty, it helped counter the smell of smoke. Lars put on some dance music and pulled Unni out on the floor, several people were dancing with beer bottles and cigarettes in their hands and the boy who was called Stein asked Helle if she wanted to dance, she put down her bottle and followed him out

on the floor, I drank the rest of my beer, opened another bottle and clung to it. The boy who was called Finn asked me if I wanted to dance, he was very drunk. I nodded, I didn't mind that he was drunk, that his eyes were swimming, that he couldn't see me properly. We danced and when he lost his balance, I supported him, I held him tight so he didn't crash onto the floor, it was nice to have a job to do. When the music slowed down, he pulled me towards him, we danced more closely and he kissed me with his tongue and I kissed him back, it wasn't difficult, I had practised. A little later he guided me from the floor to the sofa, pulled me down onto it next to him, put his arm around my shoulder and kissed me again and again and I forgot about mum until it was ten o'clock, then I had to remember her. Nobody wanted to leave, but I had promised and fortunately Unni and Helle walked with me back to the bus stop the same way we had come while the snow continued to fall and made the world unreal. And the bus arrived with glowing lights and we got on in silence and with a feeling of solemnity while the lights from the bus dyed the softly falling snowflakes yellow so they looked like glittering confetti whirling in slow motion. When we got off, it suddenly grew darker and we went our separate ways, I was going back to mum who might have rung Unni and not got an answer, my fear returned. I decided I would say that we had sung 'Happy Birthday' so loudly that we might not have heard the telephone, and if I smelled of smoke, it was because Unni's parents smoked. At ten minutes to eleven and on time I walked through the gate, opened the entrance door, then up the stairs at the top of which mum was standing, ready to sniff me, but I had chewed gum and sucked lozenges and because it was Saturday my parents had drunk wine and were keen to watch the last ten minutes of a crime drama so she let me go to my room. I went to bed and I repeated to myself what Finn had said when he realised I had to go. *Oh, don't go yet!* I kept repeating it and I treasured it. *Oh, don't go yet!* I stored his words and the kisses like an empowering secret in my heart. So that was one way to deal with it.

The next morning while it was still grey dawn outside, while my parents and sisters were still in the kitchen having breakfast, I called out that I was going to Ullevålseter with Unni, I ran out into the fresh air that smelled of snow, a dry smell of frozen water drops and ice crystals, I ran across the common to Unni's housing block behind the corner shop, and because her parents were away in Odalen we could sit on her bed and relive last night. The boy's full name was Finn Lykke and he was experienced, Unni said, he had a moped, but he would turn eighteen soon and then he could get his driver's licence.

We walked to Ullevålseter Snowsports Centre, taking a route off the beaten track, on an unlit path, a new era had arrived and we met it with awe and high hopes.

Soon, however, as early as Monday morning, my Saturday transgressions of beer drinking and tongue-kissing appeared in a different and more distressing light, how easily I had allowed myself to be led astray, how easily I had broken the commandments, and again I felt the fear of impending corruption which mum had succeeded in instilling in me, a fear that I had not been fearful enough when faced with danger, what was next for me, drugs and sudden death?

That Thursday Unni told me there was going to be another party in the unfamiliar part of town on the Saturday. What I had regarded as an empowering secret and a way forward late Saturday night, but which when I woke up Monday morning had turned into something I dreaded even thinking about, had paled, fortunately, in the days that followed and now last Saturday seemed unreal. And yet the vague memory of it was more alarming than appealing and so I felt no inclination or excitement at the thought of going to another party in the unfamiliar part of town. I didn't, however, express my view because I could see that Helle and Unni didn't share it, they got excited at once, they were happy.

On our way home, once we had said goodbye to Helle in Blåsbortveien, I gathered from Unni that she thought my lack of enthusiasm for the party on Saturday was because of my mum. And it probably was, but it was also rooted in my realisation of how beer, how alcohol had affected me that last Saturday. It had made me forget about mum, which was fine, it seemed to have emboldened me more than it did my friends, which was also fine, but within that elation I had felt something uncontrollable stir in me, a desire to break for the border, a sense that I contained bombs that might go off if I drank enough, and a great thirst, an irresistible compulsion to drink just enough to make those very bombs explode.

But that was impossible to explain and so I didn't say anything. Unni suggested I tell my mum we would be working on our group project that Saturday, I nodded thoughtfully. And yet after we had said goodbye, the idea became more attractive with every hour, with every minute. Finn Lykke saying *Oh, don't go yet!* and the tongue-kissing, I kissed the back of my hand and the mirror, and when all the family met for breakfast that Saturday morning, I said that I needed to work on our group project with Helle and Unni that evening at Helle's house. Mum immediately wanted to know why they couldn't come here and why we couldn't work in my room, but it was better at Helle's, I said, because she didn't have any siblings and she also had a room in the basement we could have to ourselves, and mum looked at dad who understood about the basement room, he said, and that made me happy, that he supported me somehow, that he seemed to understand that I found mum nagging and interfering. But at the same time I got the feeling that he didn't mind me being out in the evening because the mood at home was probably more relaxed when the person who made mum anxious wasn't there. Even if it meant arguments once I came back.

I was to be home by eleven.

Some hours later mum suddenly opened the door to my room and stopped in the doorway, her eyes darting around, I put the book I used to camouflage

my anxiety on my lap and looked up at her quizzically. She asked why we had to work on the group project tonight of all nights, why not now, during the day, her voice was trembling slightly. I was prepared, always prepared, and I said that Helle was playing in a handball tournament and that we had to work around her because she had written an extended essay on the European Community last year, and this year she was writing about the Norwegian referendum on the same topic. And mum shut her mouth, but not the door, she had grown paler now. So it's just you and Helle and Unni? I nodded mutely. No one else? No. No boys? No. She took a step inside, somewhat hesitantly because I was growing up and becoming more assertive, but she couldn't help herself, it was eating away at her and she needed reassurance and she hoped that she could get it this way, by scrutinising me, probing for signs, but she didn't find any. She was suspicious and she had cause to be, but I didn't know that at the time – though I had an inkling that not everything was as it should be with me – that something lived deep within me, was working away in me, and if it led to confirmation, then what? She was looking for signs of something she simultaneously suspected and feared, desperately hoping not to find anything in order to be reassured and so far she hadn't found anything, but still she didn't feel safe because she didn't know what she was looking for. She wanted to get rid of her unnerving, intrusive suspicion of what might have happened to me by finding evidence that would prove her suspicion was baseless, but seeing as that was impossible, she sought instead to prevent the potential consequences of what she suspected and feared but didn't actually want to deal with, from a twisted belief that it was possible to do so by smothering me, by forcing me, by nudging me into acting and behaving like a healthy, normal teenager. Only she didn't realise that her hysteria and fear ultimately suggested and homed in on the very thing she didn't want to know.

Or she wanted to make me just as nervous and anxious as she was, perhaps subconsciously, in order to share her fate with someone, in order not to bear

it alone. Or she wanted to make my life as difficult and uncomfortable as possible, to be so intrusive, suspicious and unpleasant as to wear me down so I would give up and say that I would stay home after all, just to make her stop and leave my room, but the effect was the exact opposite, of course, I couldn't wait to get out of the house and down to the unfamiliar part of town where I would be able to forget about her for a few hours, just like I had last week. She stared at me closely, I stared back at her, she tried to stare harder, but I stared hardest because I possessed a hard quality that she lacked and which her behaviour amplified, and she was aware of it and it made her even more frightened and she shifted her gaze from me to my things, the book in my lap, my clothes on the chair, the items on my desk. I said I was going for a run before I went out tonight and I got up and I was taller than her, and she walked backwards out of my room and I closed the door and got changed and ran several laps around the common, I ran until I got it out of my system and then I ran home and showered, but I couldn't shower for too long because mum was still focused on me, perhaps she timed me, her heart pounding, shackled to her own obsession with no will of her own, that was probably what it felt like to her, with no one to talk to, all alone with her anxiety with which she had infected me. I got dressed in casual clothes, stuffed some make-up and a silk blouse into my bag and listened by the door to find out when the coast was clear. Mum went from the kitchen to the living room and back, she stopped outside my door, but then she walked away, I could hear, because what could she say? When I heard her go into the bathroom and lock the door, I opened my own, I crept outside and down the stairs, it was not until I was in the entrance hall that I called out: See you later!

I was in plenty of time. The darkness helped me cope. I hid in the darkness, I stepped away from the yellow pools under the streetlights and became invisible under the spiky, naked branches of the tall birches, I walked up to their knobbly trunks, I leaned against them, hugged them and thought they talked and whispered to me: Earth to earth, your body, too, is of the earth,

and I could feel the earth in my legs, how heavy they were and the earth in my abdomen, how heavy it was, it was throbbing restlessly. I kissed the tree trunk, it tasted of Finn from last week, only calmer. I wanted to be equally calm in order to feel everything more deeply, whatever it was and whatever it was doing to me, I wanted to do slowly what I normally rushed because I was anxious like mum, because mum was always chasing me. But thinking of her made my heart beat faster and harder so I abandoned the trees and walked across the unlit common to make the journey longer and arrive at Helle's house from the rear, and soon I could see her window, how it was lit up as if in expectation, but was her heart calm, I wondered? I didn't go through the gate, but climbed over the fence instead and waited behind the garage because I had spotted Unni further down the road and I wanted to see what she looked like when she wasn't with us, if she was different then, if she looked like me. Pressing my cheek against the planks I saw her dark figure approach and reach the gate and I saw her open it with steady hands, but was her heart calm or did it hammer like mine? No. Her white face produced its own glow, lit from within. What did she have that I didn't, what was it she could do that I couldn't, what had she understood that I hadn't, what had she learned that I hadn't about how to be in the world, in life, what had she mastered that I hadn't, would I ever learn it, would I ever be able to do it?

Feeling despondent, I watched her ring the bell and be let in, would I always feel excluded from everything that was natural, from everything that was easy? I took a deep breath and counted to a hundred before I moved away, walked up the steps, rang the bell and a moment later Helle opened the door, her face flushed, and she whispered that she had beers in the basement and that she'd fetch them once her parents had left to play bridge. And after her mum called out goodbye and their car was out of the drive, she ran down to the basement and brought up ice-cold beer which we drank while we put on our make-up, Unni and Helle seemingly without a care in the world, me troubled and in tiny, tiny sips, Helle and Unni apparently

present in the moment, me on the outside as if I were observing everything from a distance and with mum's anxious gaze, tiny, tiny sips because the first time I tasted alcohol, last Saturday, I had felt what I guessed mum suspected and feared, that alcohol might embolden me more than it did my friends, or that my need to be emboldened was particularly great, she probably sensed that I had a wish or desire to enter into a different state, to disappear, to turn into someone else, and I both wanted and feared that. Tiny, tiny sips while Helle and Unni knocked it back and became giggly and happy and more themselves and more entertaining. I drank nervously and in tiny, tiny sips so the beer wouldn't make me feel like I ought to feel without beer, like the last time, like last Saturday, because without my anxiety I became a stranger to myself, I realised, the anxiety held my passion in check, my complex emotions. And was it perhaps the same for my mother, I wondered, having drunk some more beer although in tiny, tiny sips, that her anxiety, her enormous fear for me, of what I might choose to do all by myself, kept her real and deepest emotions in check, that it was a form of distraction, a way to suppress her own passion, her huge rage at the hopelessness of her life, the wasted chances of her youth, her talent for opera, possibly her own childhood? The thoughts I was having now after having drunk beer in tiny, tiny sips, what I thought I now understood, were some that I must not forget, I ordered myself, I must not drink so much beer even in tiny, tiny sips that I should forget this revealing insight. On the other hand I might have gained it precisely because I had drunk some beer. I toasted with Helle and Unni, I clinked my bottle against theirs and drank slightly bigger sips in honour of my newly acquired insight and because my anxiety had started to fade away and that was liberating. And after having drunk some more beer and in bigger gulps, it occurred to me that by transferring her anxiety to me, by ladling it all over me, that consciously or unconsciously my mum was living out her bitterness at the lost opportunities of her youth by preventing me from living out mine, that subconsciously she might not want me to have more opportunities than she herself had had. Because she could see the direction of travel, how the times were changing and how young women of the generations after hers,

including mine, were likely to have many more opportunities for independence and self-expression than she had had, and perhaps she found that unfair? That was what I wondered about that Saturday in November while Helle and Unni painted their nails, because I wanted to understand my mother and myself, but later that same month something would happen which would cause me to re-examine all the thoughts I'd had that Saturday, and it would be another sixteen years before I gained certain knowledge of my true situation at the time, but the seed of this insight was sown, the gate to the crypt was eased open that one time in my life I was sixteen years old in November.

It was dark November and cold outside when we left Helle's big house and the beer had long since started to make me feel as I ought to feel without beer, and mum had released her hold on me so I laughed with Helle and Unni on the bus and tried the miniatures of spirits and liqueurs you get on planes that Helle had nicked from her parents who had so many of them in the basement that they would never notice if some were missing. Glittering snow was falling, the moon was full and gossamer-thin, violet clouds drifted across the sky and the blood coursed warm and steady through my veins. Helle was hoping that Stein might be there, Unni knew for sure that Lars would be there, I didn't mention Finn. Underneath the perfectly round, yellow and glowing moon in a mother-of-pearl sky my body filled with delicious warmth and I wasn't bothered about Finn, I just wanted this physical and mental state I was experiencing to last forever. Helle and Unni grew quieter the closer we came to the address, a small terraced house from which music was pouring, and I, too, fell quiet, suddenly snapping out of my happy state because by now we had run out of alcohol and that worried me. Unni rang the bell, but nobody came to the door, probably because the music was so loud that they couldn't hear the ringing, so we just opened it and stepped inside a hallway full of wet boots and coats and took off our own boots and coats, and I felt strangely naked. Unni entered the living room, scouted across it and spotted Lars, Stein tapped Helle on her shoulder

and asked her to dance, and I headed in the direction of what I thought was the kitchen which was luckily deserted, and opened the fridge which was full of beer, luckily, and I felt scared. I helped myself to a bottle, opened it, drank and clung to the bottle and drank again and leaned against the doorway, hoping desperately that Finn Lykke would turn up. Then he turned up, he came through the front door with lots of others, all with glittering snowflakes in their hair, but I had eyes only for him. He tossed his coat on the pile of other coats and glanced around the room as if looking for someone and he spotted me and came staggering towards me, he was very drunk. I didn't mind that his eyes were glazed, that his eyes were swimming, that he couldn't focus on me properly, it meant I didn't feel observed, I felt freer than if he had been sober, I hid myself in his intoxication and the loud music which made it impossible to have a conversation. He wanted to make out and I made out with him, I wanted to do everything he wanted to do, the word no did not exist in my vocabulary, in my body, we danced and we made out until I had to leave to catch the bus, and fortunately Helle and Unni were willing to leave at the same time as me, we stood in the hall and we made out by way of goodbye with the boys who might now be our boyfriends until we had to run for the bus. Oh, don't go yet, Finn said. Oh, don't go yet, he called out after me, but I had to go because mum was back inside my head and I dreaded seeing her again, my fear returned.

I hoped my parents had drunk some wine because it was Saturday and there was Saturday entertainment on TV, I prayed to God and crossed my fingers for wine and Saturday-night entertainment while I chewed gum and sucked lozenges. Unni and Helle chewed gum as well, but they didn't feel the way I did, that was more obvious to me than ever, I suddenly felt clear-headed. We caught the bus together, we got off the bus together and we walked together for a little while from the bus stop, but we were not in the same place because we hadn't been doing the same thing, they had done something different from me, or vice versa. At the junction with

Blåsbortveien, we went our separate ways and I walked alone the last stretch towards the house where I lived on the first floor and I could see the light was on in the kitchen window, that mum was behind it, watching. I felt a surge of nausea, perhaps I was about to throw up and then she would realise that I'd been drinking, what would I do then? I steeled myself, I ordered myself to breathe calmly, a deep breath in and a deep breath out and I opened the door and walked up the stairs at the top of which mum was standing, demanding to know in a shrill voice where I had been. I replied with forced calm that she knew where I had been, I had told her earlier, that I had been with Helle and Unni, working on our group project on the European Community, a very complicated assignment. I could use that against her, I had noticed how she reacted every time I mentioned it, how it wrong-footed her, and she would not appear to have rung Helle's parents, and anyway she probably wouldn't dare call them because she didn't know them and she respected them because dad respected them because they lived in a detached house on the upper side of Tåsenveien and because Helle's father worked for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and her mother was a teacher, so that if against all expectation mum ever dared pick up the phone and call them, dad would hear it and stop her because her anxiety made him uncomfortable, I had noticed that, I had seen his awkwardness whenever mum lost control, especially in front of others, and mum picked up on dad's unease and felt ashamed of her anxiety because she knew that it was abnormal and, I'm guessing, she suspected that it pointed towards the very knowledge she didn't want to have, which no one must ever know, and so she tried to show it only to me. I realised that she hadn't rung and I was relieved, but I wanted to go to my room so I could be on my own in order to digest the evening's events, but she was in my way, fingering my clothes and sniffing me, my hair, my breath while I tried to get past her and I said she had no reason to be suspicious, that it wasn't eleven o'clock yet, and here I was as promised, alive and well, and still she kept on at me. Was anyone else at Helle's house, were there any boys at Helle's house, in a voice so loud that one of my sisters woke up and started crying and that suited me just fine because then mum had to deal with her and dad

called out from the living room: Oh, leave the girl alone, and I made it to my room and if I'd had a key I would have locked the door. I lay down with my heart pounding and I was unable to sleep and I couldn't relive the kissing like last Saturday, it was ruined.

Finn Lykke called on the Wednesday. At a quarter past three, luckily mum wasn't at home, luckily I answered the telephone, he introduced himself and asked to speak to me, uttered my hard name. Speaking, I said, he asked me how I was, I said I was well, he asked if I knew Bjørn Paulsen. I didn't. He goes to Berg, he said, but I still didn't know who Bjørn Paulsen was. He asked how well I knew Unni, I said that she was my best friend, he asked if he could come over to see me. How about I come over to yours? He had a moped and could ride it there, he had my address. Again I felt as if I had earth in my legs, heavy earth in my abdomen, but luckily I was alone in the hall where the telephone sat on a chest of drawers so I could see myself in the mirror above it the whole time, I could see that now I had red patches across my face. I was scared that the door downstairs might open, that mum would come upstairs and see that my face was all red, I wanted the call to be over while I was alone at home and I wanted to give a brave answer to the question of who I was. Yes, I said, there was silence down the other end and the awful thought occurred to me that he had hoped I would say no, that it wasn't a good time, unfortunately, that he didn't really want to come over to my place, he just wanted to be brave like me, ask me out like a man. After what I thought was a long time, he said that he would come over around six o'clock, was that alright? Yes, I said with my ears tuned towards the entrance door, it was absolutely fine, but I suggested we meet by the church which was easier to find than our house, and that was alright with him, he said, see you later. Wednesday, 19 November 1975, at six o'clock that same evening.

I went to my room, I tried to work on the group project, I heard mum come back with my sisters, enter the hallway below, walk up the stairs and come

towards my room, she opened the door, but I was sitting at my desk like a good girl. She looked at me, we looked at each other, she didn't know what to say, after some hesitation she closed the door and went to the kitchen or so it sounded to me. I heard my big brother come back, I heard my dad come back, first his car, then his heavy footsteps up the stairs, his voice. Soon afterwards mum called out that dinner was ready, I went to the kitchen and sat down in my usual seat, fishcakes in white sauce and potatoes with chopped parsley, I will never forget it. It really did happen, it is strange to remember it now and it seems unreal that this family would sit around a kitchen table and have dinner together almost every night all year round, it's mind-blowing, but that is how it was, and the strangest thing of all is that it was the most natural thing in the world, even if the atmosphere was tense, of course it was, I can't have been the only one to squirm with discomfort on my chair, but that was all I knew and no one ever said anything, of course they didn't.

After the fishcakes I returned to my room, but I would need to leave soon so I told mum I was picking up a book from Helle which I needed for the group project on the European Community, of which dad was a supporter, I wouldn't be long. And mum looked at dad who was reading the newspaper, he had cancelled his subscription to *Arbeiderbladet*, now we subscribed to the more conservative *Aftenposten*, and mum nodded silently and I ran down the stairs and outside.

I walked up to the church, my pace slower now, it was a quarter past five and I wanted to compose myself in a way I couldn't do at home where so many unspoken things lingered in the air, the silence of so many evil deeds, I think, now that I know the full story of the unhappy girl.

The church and the parish hall lay on a hill and were clearly visible to the surrounding houses as well as from further away, I knew the buildings and the neighbourhood, the lawns, the flowerbeds, the ornamental shrubs and

the big trees like the back of my hand from playing there so often, I had visited the church many times to seek respite from my unease, to be filled with gravitas, joy or a sorrow which wasn't mine and experience my own through the music.

Now I walked there in a new way. It wasn't a repetition, but even actions that will be repeated, and perhaps repeated frequently, must happen for the first time at some point. Big lamps lit up the main entrance and the large wooden door with its brass nails, apart from that it was dark, the parish hall and the bell tower lay in darkness. I climbed the wall that separated them and sat in the darkness, hidden, but with a view of the roads he would need to ride up, and I would be able to see his moped in plenty of time to jump down and position myself by the church door as if I'd only just arrived.

It was a beautiful evening. The moon hung like a golden crescent against the dark sky, the stars were shining around it, so numerous that I gave up counting. It was not particularly cold, I breathed lightly without straining, it happened by itself in a steady rhythm, and I was reminded of what I had decided on my way to Helle's house some days ago, my resolution to take my time with things I normally did quickly, to become more aware of what was happening and the effect it had on me. It was hard. I had never been alone with a boy in the way that perhaps I would be now, soon. But I didn't want to imagine it because what I imagined in advance never turned out the way I had hoped and had imagined; if I imagined it, the chances it might happen as I'd hoped would dwindle. Even so, hopeful images kept intruding while I tried to force them back.

Silent, so silent. The moon glowed golden on the snow-covered grass or was it the lamps that lit it up? What if he didn't come, what if he had changed his mind, then I heard the sound of a moped in Godals vei, I stood up on the wall and saw the moped in the distance, its single headlight, the headlight on its way to the church, in my direction, there were no cars in the

area, I could hear the engine noise more clearly now, it came closer to me as did the headlight, it turned into the church car park and crossed it and continued up the tarmac footpath where no vehicles were allowed. I jumped down from the wall with my heart pounding, I walked to the church door and stopped in front of it, lit up by a lamp so he would see me. He arrived soon afterwards and he saw me, he raised his right hand by way of hello, turned off the engine and let the moped roll in my direction. It wasn't Saturday, there was no music, we had not been drinking. He was wearing his helmet so we didn't hug. I suggested to him the plan I had come up with while I was on the wall, that we could go to the petrol station and buy some cola, it wasn't far from where we were. He nodded, but he wasn't allowed a passenger on the back, he said, he'd had one not so long ago, got stopped by the police and fined. I didn't ask who had sat behind him, who might have wrapped their arms tightly around his waist, I said that I could run there, that I was a good runner, he nodded and turned the moped around and I ran down the church hill as light as a feather while he rode illegally on the footpath and I carried on running on the pavement along Kristoffertunet while he rode alongside me so slowly that we reached the petrol station at the same time, it was easy. He parked and took off his helmet, put it on the moped's seat and ruffled his hair, came over to me, bent down and hugged me. Hello, he said as if it was a joke, hello I replied seriously, and we went inside the brightness of the petrol station. He bought two colas and a ten-pack of Marlboro, he opened both bottles with a cigarette lighter he had in his pocket and gave one to me as we walked back to the moped. He opened the cigarette pack and offered it to me, I shook my head. He lit a cigarette with his lighter, cupping his hand over the flame to shield it against any wind or tiny, invisible drops of rain in the air or he might have done it out of habit, he did it like a man, it looked like something out of a movie, I was smitten. He smoked like a movie star, he was turning eighteen soon and then he could take his driving test. So you don't know Bjørn Paulsen, he said, and I shook my head because I still didn't know Bjørn Paulsen. There was silence for a moment, then he asked where Berg College was and I could show him that, it wasn't far, he thought that was a good idea. I ran

ahead of him across the big, dangerous, socially significant Tåsenveien that mum had always been so scared of us crossing when we were little and further up Irisveien and turned left down John Colletts allé that led to Berg College and when I saw the big building, I slowed down on realising that I had never been there in the evening, how different it looked now, deserted and its windows dark, the lights were only on in the sports hall. Finn dismounted and pushed his moped alongside me through the archway, he asked where my classroom was and I pointed to the dark windows. He pushed the moped to the entrance nearest the windows I had pointed out, the door I usually used, parked it there, took off his helmet, placed it on the moped's seat and ruffled his hair. Come on then, he said, and I walked over to him and he guided me up the three steps to the locked entrance door and turned me so I was standing with my back to it, he brushed the fringe from my eyes, bent down towards my mouth and kissed it. Nudged me gently towards the door so that I could lean against it, so that he could kiss me for longer, more passionately. Not like at the parties when we had been drinking, not like when we were inside where it was warm. Outside in the cold, in the darkness which heightened the sensation and made it lovelier. He took off his gloves and slipped his right hand up my jacket and under my jumper and inside my bra, I trembled. He cupped my left breast and rocked it with his eyes closed, I opened mine and saw how into it he was, how much he was enjoying it. I admired that, I loved him for that, that he was able to do it. I don't know how long we stood there, I could have stood there forever, then he stopped, but not abruptly, not suddenly, he ended it quietly and nicely, carefully he pulled out his hand and slowly moved his face away from mine, he opened his eyes and smiled, brushed my fringe away from my eyes again then closed his mouth, leaned forwards and kissed my gaping mouth with his closed one, that was what Unni had meant when she said he was experienced. He found his cigarettes, shook one out and sat down on the steps, he patted the step next to him for me to sit there close to him. So I did. He put the cigarette between his lips and flicked the lighter so its flame lit up half his face before the darkness returned, but when he took a puff, the cigarette glowed orange red in the dark evening

and when he blew out the smoke it smelled irresistibly sweet and spicy. He held the cigarette between his ring and middle finger and rested his wrist on his knee, a small pale skinny hand, he raised the cigarette to his lips again, inhaled and showed me that he could make smoke rings that might land in my hair. So you don't know Bjørn Paulsen, he said again, he repeated the question and I shook my head, then he stubbed out his cigarette and said it was time to go and we got up and walked down the steps and he put on his gloves and donned his helmet, mounted the moped and pushed it onwards with his feet to the archway, started the engine, smiled at me, waved, rode off and was gone. I went back to the steps, I picked up the cigarette butt, I sniffed it and then I put it back as evidence.

I savoured the experience on my way home in the dark. Mum was standing in the window when I came back, she was waiting at the top of the stairs when I climbed them, she came too close to me and thought I smelled of smoke, she said, pinching my coat, she wanted to know where the book was, the one I had gone to fetch from Helle's, I'd forgotten about that. I said that we had looked for it in her room and in the living room where her parents were smoking, and mum knew that Helle's parents smoked, I had told her so many times and she had smelled it many times, and yet she had to ask, it was a ritual or compulsion that ruined the experience I'd just had and I wondered if that was precisely why she did it, in order to ruin everything so I would always associate good experiences with the ugly ones that followed.

Oh, leave the girl alone, dad called out from the living room and saved me.

When I returned to my room, when I returned to myself, I could feel, fortunately, that I hadn't lost the memory, his lips against my lips, his tongue against my tongue, the taste of his mouth and his hand under my jumper, I wrote it down in my diary to preserve it and make it last.

The next morning I left for college earlier than usual and I walked in the deep darkness with a strong and promising but also sombre feeling of distancing myself from mum. The lights were only on in the staff room when I arrived. I went to the entrance where we had been yesterday to see the proof, there it was. Consumed by a restlessness brought on by my hopes and lies, I started pacing up and down the schoolyard in order to numb the dangerous lies and my unrealistic hopes for what might happen until I spotted Unni's familiar and much-loved figure down the road, her new gait and her glossy hair coming in my direction. I ran towards her to tell her, but she already knew that Finn Lykke had been to see me yesterday because a friend from the TUC Youth Association had called her to say so and it might mean that Finn and I were now boyfriend and girlfriend, that we were a couple. Lars had never come to see her on a weekday, nor had Stein ever gone to see Helle on a weekday.

I wondered if we were a couple. I wondered if I had a boyfriend now. When you are sixteen and you have a boyfriend, then you do it, you are grown-up and no one can stop you.

Every time the bell went for the next lesson, I would go in through the door where we had stood to look at the cigarette butt which was still there, to reassure myself that it really had happened, to feel a warm glow and sense the earth in my legs and my abdomen which grounded me. Even if I had lessons in other parts of the college, I would use the same entrance and get a thrill out of looking at the cigarette butt and relive the memory of his hand on my breast. Whenever the bell rang for break, I would exit through that door even if I was coming from a classroom at the far end of the large building.

He didn't call. All afternoon, all evening I sat in my room listening out for the telephone in the hall, but he didn't call.

I was about to go to bed when mum tore open the door to my room and stormed in, waving a cap from a beer bottle. What's this? I could see it was a cap from a beer bottle, but that obviously wasn't what she was asking, what should I say? What's this, she repeated more loudly, thrusting it into my face, look what I found in the laundry basket, she said, how did it end up there, she demanded to know, I thought I went red but I couldn't be sure. How should I know, I said, wondering if I'd had a beer-bottle cap in my pocket that might have fallen out when I put my trousers in the laundry basket. But I didn't keep bottle caps in my pockets, my fear was too strong, my vigilance too great because mum was with me like a bottle cap under my skin, mum's fear, mum's scrutiny and mum's voice, they all intensified the closer to home I got so even if I had drunk beer, I would sober up on my way back, I got so tense and defensive once I saw the house where I lived on the first floor that I would never have forgotten a beer-bottle top in my pocket. It's a cap from a beer bottle, she said in a high-pitched voice, what does that have to do with me, I said, how did it end up in the laundry basket, she challenged me in that shrill voice, how should I know, I said, oh I'm sure you know, she said, oh, leave the girl alone, dad called out from the living room, thank you dad, because mum left. I wondered if the bottle cap was his. I would need to check my clothes before I put them in the laundry basket, check my bags, sports bag and satchel, I'm guessing she went through everything when I was out of the house.

He called on Friday. I had just come back from college, mum wasn't at home, thankfully, it was a quarter to three, the telephone rang and I stared at it, a strong hunch told me that it was him. I reached for the receiver and I knew that it was him, I lifted the receiver and pressed it to my ear and I was sure. Hello, I said, and he could hear that it was me and he said that it was him: Good to see you the other day, he said, it was two days ago that we made out on the steps of Berg College and he cupped my breast.

His parents would be away tomorrow Saturday so he could invite people over, he said, not too many, he said, a few, he said, Unni and Lars and Helle and Stein and the two of us, he said, if I wanted to. I wanted to.

He told me where it was, three doors down from where we had been last Saturday, eight o'clock, he said.

'Yes,' I said.

'I'll see you then,' he said.

'Yes,' I said.

Saturday at eight o'clock. That was only a day away. I wrote it in my diary. Dear God, please don't let me die before then.

I went to the bathroom, I locked the door and studied my face in the mirror. My childish face, my anxious face, my fearful, flitting gaze, the nervous twitch at the corner of my mouth, on Sunday all that would be gone. Finally a chance, a transformative action that would strip away this stupid face, calm my pounding heart, break the burning bond, set me free! I promised myself it was going to happen, I leaned forwards and sealed my pledge with a kiss.

I wrote it in my diary, I promised myself that it was going to happen, I imagined how it would start. For the rest of that day, for all of the next day, I imagined the beginning, the opening scenes, I pictured them in detail, I dreamed about it the whole night to Saturday, I wrote about it in my diary and I couldn't sleep for images and quivering anticipation. Saturday morning I took out my diary and wrote: It will happen tonight. The event that no one ever forgets. I will write about it here, on these blank pages that my fingers are stroking as they write, pages that smell of expectation, that is the smell of white paper, the event you will never forget because no one ever forgets their first time.

The sky was heavy when I opened the curtains and saw that it was raining outside, leaden rain that caused the snow to melt so everything grew even darker than it already was and filthier. I put on my running clothes, called out that I was going for a run, stepped out in the hard and cold November rain and I ran up to Lake Sognsvann and circled it twice, hot from excitement, and ran around it a third time so I didn't have to go home and to work off the stress of hope and anxiety, but no matter how quickly I ran it wasn't fast enough, no matter how far I ran it wasn't far enough, I always had to go back to where I started, to mum.

So I ran home because where else would I go, I went to the bathroom to shower and then to my room with a towel wrapped around me, I heard mum come, mum open the door.

'What is it?' I said.

'Yes, what is it?' she said.

She continued to stand there, staring at me.

But I refused to argue with her! I didn't have the energy for a confrontation! I didn't have the energy to defend myself against the indirect accusation that her anxiety and desperation were my fault, I wanted to be on my own, gather my thoughts and feel excited, I didn't want to have to deal with her, her suspicions and her nerves, I didn't want to show up exhausted and tearful, sad and helpless and glum and weary, I didn't want to turn up for what was going to happen tonight with my mind all muddled up. I would rather be told off afterwards because I would be better able to bear it then, by then I would have become someone else, someone stronger. Mum's plaintive face. My heart is breaking, she said. You don't know how my heart is breaking, she said. I wanted to say: Mine too, but I didn't, instead I looked at the floor where a small puddle was forming because my hair was dripping wet.

How long did this go on for, I wonder? Then she asked, sounding hopeful, if I was going to be in that evening.

I said I might go to Unni's.

If a battle ensued, I would win, I was much stronger than her, I probably wouldn't be able to fight her physically so I might have to make a run for it. She left, but the smell of her fear lingered in the room. Helle was due to call me at six.

I put on my best underwear, dressed casually, took whatever make-up I needed from my make-up bag and put it in my bag so the make-up bag itself could stay behind on the desk as evidence that there was no cause for alarm. I stuffed a nice blouse and a nice jumper into my bag, took out a book but was unable to read, I didn't dare play music or I might be overcome by unmanageable emotions, I waited for the telephone. It rang at five past six, I heard mum make her way to the chest of drawers, heard her say hello before she came to my door. My door opened, she told me it was Helle, I left my room, picked up the receiver and pressed it to my ear, mum lingered in the doorway with a dishcloth in her hand, she was watching me, that was fine by me. Oh, how nice, I said, that's a good idea, I said, does she really want to do that, I said, that's brilliant, I said, have you spoken to Unni, I said, yes, I'm free, I said, I'm not doing anything tonight, I said, so I'll see you shortly, I said, rang off and turned to mum. Helle's mother had read the introduction to our group project and spotted several flaws that we should probably fix, she was willing to help us with it tonight if we wanted her to, and we did.

What could mum say? She said nothing, her eyes narrowed, she mulled it over. I returned to my room, but left the door open so she could see me putting on my coat, tossing pens and papers into my bag on top of the contents she didn't know I had already packed, I walked past her, ran down the stairs and outside, but when I reached the gate, she opened the kitchen window and called out: So it's just the three of you?

'Yes!'

‘All you’re doing is work on your group project?’

‘Yes!’ The word ‘no’ had been wiped from my vocabulary.

‘You won’t be late, will you?’

‘No later than eleven,’ I shouted and ran so I wouldn’t be able to hear if she called out anything in response.

It had almost stopped raining. I went up to the church which was asleep on the hill, locked up and grey in the glow from the lamps, I walked around to the back where the stained-glass windows reached all the way down to the ground, I leaned forwards, I peered into the church space and thought I could see the candlesticks sparkle on the altar. I knelt down on the cold ground, closed my eyes and folded my hands, after a while my unease dissipated and in its place I felt a gentle wistfulness like before you set out on a long, long journey. And because it was a kind of goodbye, I was able to hear all the sounds of the evening more clearly, the strange sighing of the wind in the tall trees, the last drops of rain hitting the stained glass and a dog barking in Godals vei.

How long was I there? I had managed to shake off mum. Now feeling fairly calm I got up and walked down the hill where there were no lights and took a longer route to Helle’s house than my usual, a detour via an old manor house on the top of the other hill in the neighbourhood, and when I stood between the white main building which was now a residential home for boys and the red barn which was now a nursery school where I myself had once gone, it suddenly started to snow in the dark evening and I felt as close to the sky as I could ever get in this strange place where I had been born and grown up, and because it was now as dark as if it were the middle of the night, I could see the moon and countless stars and my sense of calm which had been precarious, deepened, and sure of my heart I walked to Helle’s house and rang the bell.

Helle opened the door and whispered that she had some beers in the basement, once her parents left for bridge she would fetch them. Unni was

already there. We went to Helle's room, got changed and put on make-up, and the moment her parents' car left the drive, she fetched the beers from the basement and we drank and carried on putting on our make-up and started to giggle, and my sense of calm which had been precarious to begin with and then deep, settled within me, grew deeper still and more stable like a warm, heavy stone in my abdomen while at the same time a strange lightness rose in me, created by the stone, a liberating sense of uplift in my chest and forehead, and I forgot about mum.

Around seven o'clock we walked to the bus stop in the darkness and by then the grey rain of earlier had been transformed into glittering, softly falling snow, and we walked through it, enveloped in a strange scent of lipstick and perfume in the cold, I will never forget it. Giggling and elated, then suddenly silent and solemn because of what was going to happen, the event that hung in the air.

Unni wasn't Lars's girlfriend, Helle wasn't Stein's girlfriend, but I was Finn's girlfriend, and when you're over sixteen and you have a boyfriend, then you do it.

We got off at the same bus stop as the last time in the unfamiliar part of town, in the same streets as the last time, but this time I was the most confident. The glowing moon greeted me encouragingly and my purpose took my legs down a road I will remember forever. Helle's glossy lips in the darkness, Unni's shiny brown eyes, the taste of cherry brandy and harsh gin from the miniatures you get on planes that Helle had in her bag. Past the sleepy, terraced houses from last Saturday until we saw the number and the sign saying 'Lykke' on the door. Lights were on in the windows, we couldn't hear any music and we hesitated on the steps, but I didn't want to hesitate and so I rang the bell.

Finn opened the door. Finn Lykke opened the door wearing jeans and a freshly ironed white shirt, he had made an effort. He gave me a hug and I felt more at ease while it lasted. Unni, Helle and I followed him into the living room which looked much like the living room where we had been last Saturday except this one was empty, there was no one on the sofa, Finn said that Stein and Lars had gone to get beer; fortunately they soon turned up carrying bags jingling with promise and set them down on the table, it was starting to look like a party. We opened some beers and drank and Finn sat down next to me and put his arm around me and seemed taller than the last time we had seen each other and much more relaxed than last Saturday, what a difference one encounter on an ordinary Wednesday could make. They had played an ice hockey match that morning and had won, they said, and they drank to that and clinked their bottles, we all drank to that, and Finn had scored a goal, they said, and described it and I pictured Finn in his ice hockey kit, his helmet and cage and big shoulder pads, how he wove and zigzagged his way forward, hitting the puck with his stick, slamming it into the goal. I realised I was more in love with the version of him in his ice hockey kit than with the one sitting next to me on the sofa, I avoided looking at him, I drank.

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Luckily Lars put on some music so loud that it was difficult to talk, that was the whole point I guess, he pulled Unni out on the floor and Stein pulled Helle out on the floor and Finn pulled me out on the floor and we danced with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, Lars changed the record and we danced more slowly and we set down the bottles and stubbed out the cigarettes and put our arms around each other and started to make out.

We made out to lots of songs before Finn took my hand and guided me out into the hallway where no lights were on and there, in the darkness, we made out more passionately. He pressed me softly against the wall and slipped his right hand under my blouse and under my best bra and cupped my breast as promisingly as he had done in the schoolyard at Berg College

just a few days ago, and after what I thought was a nice interval but quite a long one, he removed his hand, took mine and led me towards the stairs, then up the stairs, up to the first floor where I assumed the bedrooms were.

I will never forget it, the stairs leading up to what I guessed must be the bedrooms. The carpet stair runner, burgundy with a golden border which didn't reach all the way to the sides of the steps so you could see the wood underneath, the runner itself was kept in position by thin metal rods in the corners of each riser. How strange, I thought while Finn Lykke led me up the stairs to the first floor, that I was on my way to something I would never forget, which would become a chapter in my life, one of the most important. Even before it had happened, I already knew that it would be a chapter in my life that I would never forget, I knew in advance that it would be unforgettable. How strange was that? On my way up the stairs on a burgundy runner with a golden border held in place by thin brass rods in the corners of each riser behind Finn Lykke in his jeans and freshly ironed white shirt.

We reached a passage with four closed doors, he walked to the one furthest to the left and I followed with my hand in his until he let go of it, opened the door and turned on the light in what looked like a guest bedroom, it seemed uninhabited. A made-up bed and a bedside table, a window facing the street with the curtains closed, a sink to the left of the door, a chair to the right. He closed the door behind us and started to undress, he undid, without fear it seemed to me, the buttons of his freshly ironed white shirt, took it off and tossed it on the chair, bent over his belt and the zip of his jeans, took them off and tossed them on the chair as if I weren't there, then he took off his socks, first one, then the other, and stood in front of me in his underpants, then he took off his underpants and stood naked in front of me with fair pubic hair and blond tufts under his armpits, small, almost inverted nipples, but he didn't seem to notice me. Suddenly he looked lost and he went back to the clothes he had just thrown on the chair, picked up

his jeans and searched the pockets and while he was busy doing that, looking for something in the pockets of his jeans, I undressed as quickly as I could in order to do it without him watching, I put my clothes on the bedside table, my best blouse, my best trousers, my best bra, my best knickers and socks, I put everything on the bedside table and slipped under the bedspread and the duvet while he was still rummaging through his pockets for something without saying a word, in a great silence. I lay under the duvet, watching him, naked, with fair pubic hair and blond tufts under his armpits, then he found what he was looking for, a condom, I could see, which he tried to open but couldn't. He tried to tear off the wrapper, but he still couldn't, he had to use his teeth to finally get it out and then he tried to put it on, but failed because he didn't have an erection, his small, pale, flaccid penis dangled between his thighs. I turned carefully and slowly towards the wall so the bed wouldn't creak and draw his attention to me, but my ears pricked up when I heard the snapping of rubber and his breathing, his frustrated breathing because he couldn't get the condom on. Then I heard him approach the bed, he came towards the bed in which I lay and he lifted up the duvet and climbed in and lay down behind me, leaned on his elbow and touched my shoulder in order to turn me over. I turned over voluntarily, I rolled onto my back and he kissed me and got on top of me and started moving his hips the way men do during sex, as I had seen in Unni's dad's porn magazines and his blue movies, and which I had so often imagined and dreamed about, except Finn wasn't inside me. I didn't know much, but that much I did know because I used tampons when I had my period and knew what it was like to have something inside me, and he wasn't. His head was slumped over my shoulder, his panting wet mouth brushed my neck, he moved his hips as men do during sex, except this wasn't intercourse because he wasn't inside me, I didn't know much, but that much I did know.

I whispered to him that he wasn't inside me. *Finn, you're not inside me*, but he didn't seem to hear, he was wrapped up in himself, his panting breath

against my neck, the back of his neck flushed and tense. *Finn, you're not inside me*, but he carried on thrusting his hips against mine, he leaned on me with all of his body, with his whole weight, his face in the crook of my neck and his hair in my mouth. *Finn, you're not inside me*, but he still didn't hear, he panted and groaned and pushed, then he suddenly stopped, raised himself up on his hands and swung his legs over the side of the bed, he got up and stood in front of me, he still didn't have an erection and the condom slipped off. He bent down, retrieved it and held it up to the light from the ceiling lamp to study it, went over to the sink, turned on the tap and filled the condom with water, he held it up to the light once more and examined it to make sure it hadn't burst, he said, so he did know that I was there. He had filled the condom with water and held it up to the ceiling light to see if there was a tear or a hole in it, but it looked intact.

I sat up slowly and swung my legs over the side of the bed, I took the opportunity to get dressed while he checked if there was a hole or a tear in the condom he had put on his penis, which hadn't been inside me, my best knickers, my best bra, blouse and trousers and socks and I tiptoed to the door, I grasped the handle and turned to him and said that I was going to join the others. He glanced at me and nodded, busy with his own concern, the condom. I walked down the stairs I had only just walked up, so filled with anticipation, on the burgundy stair runner with the golden border kept in place by slim gold-coloured metal rods at the corners of each riser, on my way down from something I would never forget, which would become a chapter in my life, a defining moment. I could hear music from the living room, soft and romantic, the others were making out in the corners of separate sofas, but they stopped when I came in and looked at me curiously, Helle and Unni with grave and solemn faces, I smiled warily and sat down in a vacant corner and could feel their eyes on me, but I didn't say anything, after all there wasn't much to say, there was nothing to tell. Then we heard footsteps on the stairs and in the hall, and soon afterwards Finn Lykke entered the living room, nicely dressed in jeans and a slightly crumpled

white shirt and made a beeline for the sofa where I was sitting, he had a smug smile on his face and his gait was like Unni's when she walked into the schoolyard the morning after spending the previous evening with Lars behind the bus shelter after the TUC Youth Association meetings. Finn entered the living room and walked towards me with his new, casual swagger, proud as a peacock, sat down next to me, put his arm around my shoulder and whispered in my ear: *Now I've made a woman of you*.

And that's how I became a woman.

We left at a quarter past ten in order to make the bus we had to catch to be home by eleven, we didn't speak as we walked. More snow had fallen while we were in Finn Lykke's terraced house and it was still snowing, heavy snowflakes falling softly, they made me want to stick out my tongue to catch them like when I was a little girl, but I didn't. We said nothing because when snow falls heavily in the dark of night people fall quiet, the snowfall commands silence and the silence of many acts. We walked in silence under the vast, starry sky above us from which the large snowflakes were falling, we walked through the snow that had already settled and on which the quietly falling flakes were landing, on the pavement, on the street, on lamp posts, on rooftops and garages and the bins at the end of drives, on street signs and the sign for the bus stop. We made tracks in the snow as we walked and Unni and Helle probably thought that it was too serious to talk about, they were silent out of respect for what I had experienced, they understood that it wasn't something you could just discuss or explain, that words were inadequate, and they were right, words were inadequate. Perhaps, I thought as I walked through the snow and left footprints in the snow and my shoulders became white with snow, I would be able to laugh about it one day, tell them about it and laugh, perhaps the day would come when the whole episode would make me smile, I thought, ultimately it would make a great story, I thought with a lump in my throat. They probably thought that they wouldn't understand until they, too, had

done it, that it wasn’t possible to talk about it straight afterwards, that it was almost impossible so we sat in the bus looking through separate windows and we got off the bus and then we went our separate ways to our separate homes.

Mum was standing in the window when I came through the gate, she was at the top of the landing when I opened the entrance door downstairs, she asked where I had been and I feared that she might have decided to call Helle’s house where nobody would have been there to answer the phone, and I said that I had been at Helle’s, that we had worked on the group project and that after Helle’s mum, who was a teacher, had pointed out the mistakes in our introduction, we had gone down to the basement room where we couldn’t hear the telephone and carried on working and then we had gone to the corner shop near the housing block where Unni lived because the snow was so nice and we had bought sweets and magazines, and surely that was alright. I couldn’t work out whether she had called or not, she was rambling incoherently and hysterically and she was upset because I had changed my plans without letting her know, without calling, never thinking of her, how scared she had been, how I only ever thought about myself and never about her because if I hadn’t come back where would she have even started to look for me, did I have any idea how worried she’d been, how it broke her heart, perhaps I should think about that and not just about myself, I stank of smoke, she said, she pinched my clothes and sniffed me and asked if Helle’s parents smoked or if anyone else had been at Helle’s house, people she didn’t know, people who smoked, had there been anyone smoking by the corner shop, who else had been in the corner shop, it went on for half an hour I realised afterwards when I checked my watch, but it felt much longer, before dad emerged from the living room to go to the bathroom. He didn’t meet my pleading gaze, he never looked me in the eye, and that was probably why I dared to look at him because I knew that he wouldn’t, but he did look at mum and he appeared exasperated by her, the hullabaloo she was forever creating, every

single Saturday, and he told her to leave me alone, went into the bathroom, locked the door and mum fell silent, the corners of her mouth trembled, and reluctantly she let me go to my room.

I closed the door, leaned against it and burst into tears, I tried to suppress the sobbing so that she wouldn't hear me if she was standing as close to the door on the other side as she probably was, I knelt down by my bed and covered my face with my pillow to muffle the sobbing I couldn't stop, I don't know how long it went on, time ceased to exist, and when I came round the house was quiet. I got changed, opened the door a little and listened out, not a sound, their door was closed, it was not until then that I tiptoed to the bathroom. Once back in my room I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep, I was restless and twitchy and in a state I didn't understand except that it was unbearable and as often when I couldn't understand myself and I felt pain whose origin I couldn't fathom because its strength was out of proportion to the situation I was in, I took out my diary to write. I opened it and re-read what I had written earlier that same morning, I looked at the white, hopeful pages that I had sniffed, which smelled of anticipation as white paper does. I will write about it here. The event you will never forget because no one ever forgets their first time. Dear diary. It has happened and I will never forget it. And then what? It was impossible to write down or describe. I couldn't bear to and nor did I want to disappoint the expectant, hungry, hopeful diary, not give the pages what they had been hoping and looking forward to, so I started making it up. I wrote as if in a daze, as if in a dream, I invented what I had imagined in explicit detail, first in slow motion, the pace matching my writing. Then I wrote quickly, I wrote as if in ecstasy, I let happen on paper everything that hadn't happened in the so-called real world, from the very first barely perceptible touch to the first, second and third orgasm. His hands on my breasts and his hands on my vagina and my hands on his penis which stiffened under my touch and grew in my hands and stood brazen and swollen like hardened steel straight up in the air and which I so ardently desired, I felt a burning sensation to have it

inside my body, I pushed it inside me so that it would fill up my hungry void, the vast emptiness of my body. I made happen in my diary everything I had longed for, which I was still longing for, I let the void be filled, my deep desire be satisfied, I wrote it as passionately as I needed it, like a scream of desire and protest, protest against mum. On paper I did everything I would never have dared to do in a real bed, given how frozen and silent I had lain underneath Finn Lykke's pale skinny body in the Lykke family's guest bed, eagerly and with a liberating lack of inhibition and a comforting tenderness for myself, with words I had never uttered, clitoris. It ran and it dripped and it spurted, it was as cathartic as throwing up, as restorative as throwing up, I wrote and I wrote, I filled my enormous void with words.

Sunday morning. Sunshine outside my window, I woke up at nine-thirty, they hadn't woken me up, I could hear them in the kitchen, the four of them, my family minus my brother, who was probably playing ice hockey. They had let me sleep, they hadn't had the heart to wake me or they didn't want my company, they wanted to avoid me and the tension that followed in the wake of my presence when mum was also there, tension you could cut with a knife, as they say, and though no one ever said anything out loud because no one could articulate the situation, I always got the blame. It was me who caused mum to lose her temper, who made mum look constantly in my direction. The minute I joined them, mum's attention instantly switched from my sisters and turned to me and though it was a negative form of attention, indeed it was a torturous, unwanted and very unpleasant attention as far as I was concerned, I guess for them, my younger sisters, it must have felt as if they lost something as soon as I appeared. I entered the kitchen and monopolised mum. It was Sunday and my younger sisters were quietly eating their breakfast with mum and dad. Our big brother was playing ice hockey or had gone skiing, I couldn't hear his voice. My brother went out as quickly and as often as he could and he was allowed to because mum didn't worry about him the way she worried about me because he had not

experienced what I had and which was working away not only in me, but also in my entire family, although only two of us knew about it and we felt it in two completely different ways, both of them terrifying. Fear, fear. My parents and younger sisters were quietly eating their breakfast and I didn't want to ruin the mood. I put on my running clothes, went out into the hall, shouted into the kitchen that I was going running with Unni to Ullevålseter. They let me go. I imagine they all breathed a sigh of relief.

I ran to Ullevålseter on my own, hidden by my beanie and scarf. I ran past people wandering quietly on their way up there, no one could see that I was me, and no one driving down from there could see that I was me, I didn't have to talk to anyone. When I got to the café at Ullevålseter, I bought hot blackcurrant cordial and waffles which I ate and drank standing in the snow behind the café. I ran further than Ullevålseter, I ran all the way to Kikut to wear myself out in the hope that I might be able to sleep that night, it was dark when I got back to Lake Sognsvann and caught the tram home. I managed Sunday dinner at five o'clock, six people around the table, four children and their parents, strangers to one another, four siblings who didn't confide in each other, who would never confide in each other, how did it come to that? Four siblings who grew up on the same first floor, in quite a small flat, but who never talked about crucial and life-changing matters, who never shared confidences, who never talked about their parents and for that reason could never unite against them should it become necessary for them to put their foot down, to put their feet down, to wear the trousers, to wear several pairs of trousers. And perhaps the parents contributed, deliberately or subconsciously, to why the four children never grew close and trusted each other, perhaps they feared that the children might join forces, turn on them, rebel or actually call them to account or at least ask pertinent questions so the parents would have to explain themselves, so the children would get explanations for the issues they pondered such as how could it all have turned out so awkward, so difficult, so damaged, when did the rot set in?

I spent the evening in my room, I didn't think about Finn Lykke.

On Monday morning it was dark outside my window when I woke up and dark on the way to college where I would meet Helle and Unni who would want to know about Finn. It was dark when they asked if Finn had called me, he hadn't, I said and I wasn't lying. I said nothing more, they scraped the snow with their boots, I didn't elaborate, but even so they could probably see that I was not so confident anymore, that my gait was the same old gait, that the new spring in my step had been short-lived.

I didn't check to see if his cigarette butt was still lying on the steps to the entrance, I used a different door, I walked around on my own and after college I went home and did my homework in my room, I didn't have dinner with the family which I tended not to do on Mondays anyway because I had extended athletics practice which finished late. I just ate some sandwiches at the kitchen counter before leaving and when the session was over, I stayed on to practise with some of the students from the year above, which I did from time to time, it helped, my body grew tired and numb and might perhaps be able to sleep, I went home and straight to bed and wondered how my life would turn out.

Mum woke me in the middle of the night. I was woken up by her standing by the bed, shaking me, by a strange, unbearable sobbing, she was howling like an animal, I was dazed and befuddled, I asked what had happened, she said that dad had gone.

Dad's gone, she hiccupped uncontrollably, and I asked if they'd had a row, she shook her head fiercely, that wasn't it, they hadn't rowed, it was worse, much worse and much more terrible, I gathered, and she looked at me as if it had to do with me, she continued to stand by my bed, crying her heart out, but she was also angry as though it was my fault that dad had gone, as though I ought to understand why, but I didn't understand what she meant, what she wanted me to do or say or what I should be able to understand or do for her.

Dad's gone, she hiccupped again, dad's gone, she stuttered in between her sobs which she was also trying to stifle so as not to wake my siblings

and yet her sobs were insistent and aimed at me as if my dad's shocking disappearance was my fault, and indeed it was, I soon realised, because she had read my diary, she wailed, and she had been horrified, obviously, and she had shown it to dad, of course, and dad had read my diary and left the house instantly, just walked out into the night. Dad's gone, she said, he read your diary and disappeared into the night, she said, dad was obviously horrified and shocked, where can he be, she demanded as if I knew the answer or ought to have known the answer, but she didn't sit down on the side of my bed and she didn't come any closer to me, she kept her distance and she didn't sniff me this time because she didn't want to be infected by me and she didn't want to smell the smell of my acts because now she knew what I was like, she had realised what I was like and she couldn't cope, it was unbearable for her, I realised, and for dad, how it had hurt them to read my wicked diary. He might be dead, she said, stressing the final and most likely word, and if so that would be my fault, I realised, where can he be, she sobbed as if she expected that I, who was to blame for all this misery, would be able to tell her; who to call, she wanted to know, the police, she wondered, so I understood that my diary might be a matter for the police. I don't know how long this went on for, it felt like a long time, my thoughts and mouth were paralysed, but I was in my nightdress, I remember, I remember that I was wearing my nightdress under which I was naked, no knickers or bra, and it felt as if her gaze penetrated the fabric of the duvet and of my nightdress, so she could see my body while at the same time she had no interest in my body or was repulsed by it or found it disgusting, she found me disgusting.

She continued to stand there, but what was I supposed to do? She expected something from me, but I didn't know what it was and so I couldn't give it to her. Did she want me to call the police because it was my fault that dad had gone and vanished into the night, was I responsible for what we did next, for how to find my dad? I felt dizzy, everything went black, perhaps I passed out, but then the entrance door below was opened and at the sound of that door opening she jumped and ran downstairs and I heard dad's deep voice and mum offering to help him take off his shoes, then dad mumbled something I couldn't hear. There, there, mum said, there, there, mum said as

if dad were a child, there you go, she said in a soothing caring voice, and I got out of bed and peered through the gap in the door while making sure they couldn't see me, I heard her help him up the stairs, one step at a time, the man on whom everything depended, on whom we all relied, the breadwinner who was drunk, my dad. I saw mum help him upstairs while making sure they did not see me, but they weren't looking in my direction, mum had forgotten me, she very much wanted to forget me, I saw them come upstairs, one step at a time until they reached the top and then down the passage to their bedroom, mum with her arm around dad's waist, he was very drunk. I crept out of my room and towards the master bedroom to see how bad it was, the damage I had inflicted on them, I peeked inside and saw dad slumped on the floor with his back against the wardrobe, he was crying, he was drunk, tears were flowing down his grimy cheeks. It isn't easy being human, he sobbed. It isn't easy being human, he repeated, still sobbing, and mum caught sight of me and stared at me hard, with such hatred, and she was no longer crying because dad was home now and the danger had passed and the fact that he had left in the first place, had walked out into the night, was my fault because of what I had written in my diary. Now safe and suddenly resourceful she got up, came over and closed the door in my face, to concentrate on the victim of my writing, my dad.

I went to my room, what else could I do, I closed the door, I crept under my duvet, I listened hard, but I didn't hear anything, what should I do now, how would I be able to live after this?

It was a forewarning that I would end up alone. That my mother, if it came to a showdown one day, would take my father's side. That if she had to choose, she would choose him who represented the family's and her own financial stability and status. It's understandable. Would I have been capable of doing otherwise had I been in her shoes? Fortunately I wasn't in her shoes.

But going to my mother with any complex or difficult issues became impossible from then on. She circled her wagons around my drunken father and shut me out, in order to protect me perhaps, I'm trying to understand her. I was left alone in the passage that night, in the dark, there were no cracks, no openings, not a glimmer of light in the darkness to which they had exiled me. I went to my room, what else could I do, paralysed by a pain I had never come close to feeling before, and I, my future self, wasn't there and couldn't comfort me.

Back then, of course, I didn't know that my parents were locked into an impossibility even greater than mine. That I was living in a crime scene.

As it happened, my family left the crime scene not long afterwards, we moved from the first-floor flat in an ordinary house in an ordinary neighbourhood to a big, detached house on the upper side of the dangerous Tåsenveien, in Holmenkollåsen, and I stopped sounding common. At that point my two younger sisters were twelve and fourteen years respectively and so ended up living their formative years in Holmenkollåsen, while my brother and I had lived ours on the first-floor flat in an ordinary house in an ordinary neighbourhood on the lower side of Tåsenveien, we had different childhoods, different teenage years and different parents, and when we moved from the fairly small first-floor flat to the big house in Holmenkollåsen, my brother and I didn't live with our parents and our two younger sisters, the four of them. We got our own flat, an extension of the main house, and it had its own entrance and own bathroom and own kitchen, and it was probably good for them, the other four, that my brother and I had our own flat with our own entrance and didn't share a bathroom or a kitchen with them, that we didn't live with them in the main house, but were at a suitable distance, at arm's length. Some months after we had moved, my mother said that she never, not for one second, missed the flat on the lower side of Tåsenveien, in Grøndals vei where I had grown up,

where I had spent my formative years so to speak, my childhood home, and that's understandable: who would miss a crime scene?

They wanted to start over, the four of them.

I couldn't sleep, I lay as if on a bed of nails with all my senses tuned to the master bedroom, but I couldn't hear a thing, I'm guessing they lay awake, paralysed by the horror of it all. I kept listening out and, at some point, I heard dad snore so he was no longer lying awake from the horror of it all although he was probably having bad dreams, nightmares, given that he had a daughter who drove him to drink. I couldn't know if mum was asleep, but because of dad's loud snoring, she wouldn't be able to hear anything if I moved. I turned on the bedside lamp, then I listened out again before I got out of bed, I slipped my hand in between the slats and the mattress where I had left my diary after having sated myself with writing, there it was, mum must have put it back after showing it to dad. After she had read the terrible text, then sometime later that evening, probably once my sisters had gone to bed, while I was at athletics practice, she must have shown it to my dad so he could read it. The diary was back in place, I took it out, but I didn't open it in order to read the entry I had written as if in a daze, instead I ripped out the pages and tore them into tiny pieces without reading them and then I crept to the bathroom and flushed them down the loo. Now they knew, now they had realised what I was like, and they were shocked, that was what they couldn't bear, their daughter's true nature and just imagine if anyone were to find out. There was no school next day as all the students were going skiing.

I heard them get up, their noises in the bathroom, in the kitchen, I didn't get up, I was in no hurry. Mum didn't come to my room. Dad, however, suddenly opened the door, entered, then closed the door behind him and stopped by my bed, he was wearing a freshly ironed shirt and tie and he smelled of aftershave, he had a meeting at the office. He didn't look me in the eye, he never looked me in the eye, he avoided me and my gaze as much

as he could because I reminded him of something unpleasant, something he didn’t want to remember, but now a pre-emptive strike was required. He wanted to know who Finn Lykke was. Who is Finn Lykke? I said it was someone who was in the TUC Youth Association with Unni. He wanted to know for how long I had known Finn Lykke. For how long have you known Finn Lykke? I didn’t even think about lying, I wasn’t thinking at all, I had been presumed guilty and I was paralysed by shame. Three weeks, I said. He said that I was not allowed to see Finn Lykke ever again. You’re not allowed to see Finn Lykke ever again or indeed anyone who goes to the TUC Youth Association with Unni. Your mother and I don’t approve of the TUC Youth Association.

Then he asked if I had bled. Did you bleed when . . . he didn’t finish the sentence. I looked at him, puzzled, but I wasn’t going to lie to him, he looked at me, demanding an answer, and I was startled by his sudden gaze and I shook my head because I hadn’t bled, not in the Lykke family’s guest bed or in my diary, blood hadn’t entered the picture, I shook my head. Perhaps he continued to question me, it seemed to me that he stayed for a long time, but at some point he must have left and closed the door behind him.

I waited until I heard his car leave, until my sisters had gone, I remember doing that, but not getting up and putting on my clothes, but I must have done because I remember that we went skiing that day and I skied almost as far as Ullevålseter. I remember hiding among numerous students in skiwear with skis and poles and rucksacks by Lake Sognsvann, that I struggled to get my boots to clip onto my skis, to get a proper grip on my poles, that I trailed behind the others, that the heavy dark spruces were laden with snow, that if I touched a branch with my pole the snow would cascade onto me, that I touched the branches with my pole and the snow scattered onto me, that soon I was way behind everyone else and alone because I was in no hurry. Long before I reached Lake Åklungen I saw my fellow students

zooming down on their way back, I skied across Lake Åklungen and over the hills until I saw the cabin, then turned back in order not to bump into anyone I'd have to talk to. I didn't know what to do. Something impossible welled up in me, I pushed it back. I didn't and I couldn't acknowledge whatever it was that was threatening to rise up inside me because I knew I wouldn't be able to cope with it or handle it, I had a strong hunch that it would kill me and so I fought it. Mortal combat was taking place inside me, I was a battlefield.

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I didn't take the tram, but walked home with my skis on my shoulder from Lake Sognsvann because where else would I go? I ate dinner with them, but I didn't utter a word. No one brought it up, never, not one word was ever said. Mum never mentioned it, dad never mentioned it, not one word was ever said, it was unmentionable. I avoided Unni so that she wouldn't ask because I didn't know what to say, and if I had managed to come up with an answer, I wouldn't have been able to tell her without collapsing, without breaking down in tears, and she wouldn't have understood why I was crying and I wouldn't have been able to explain that either. I avoided Helle, I avoided everyone who reminded me of anything that reminded me of the calamity, mum and dad on that terrible night. *It isn't easy being human*, before mum shut the door in my face. Dad the next morning, standing by my bed like an interrogator with an obvious right to know. Did you bleed?

Finn Lykke called Thursday evening and I heard dad tell him not to call me again, he forbade him to call me, said that I didn't want anything more to do with him, that I didn't want to talk to him ever again. He stopped calling, I never heard from him again, I forgot him, but I didn't forget the much bigger issue, mum and drunk dad that night and that *it isn't easy being human* before mum slammed the bedroom door in my face and I was left alone.

I didn't speak to them for months. Mum no longer interrogated me, not like she used to, mum seemed helpless now as if something inside her had been

broken and destroyed, and I was the one who had done it. But then again there was no longer anything to ask about because I was not allowed to talk to or meet Finn Lykke from now on, nor would I dream of doing so and I didn't go to the unfamiliar part of town again. We no longer spoke because I didn't have the energy and when we made tentative efforts, when she tried asking about the group project – as if she cared about that – we couldn't do it because clitoris and other unspeakable words filled the air whenever we looked at each other. So we avoided looking at each other, they avoided looking at me, approaching me, they avoided me because I was dirty and I smelled bad and I reminded them of something unbearable and horrible.

I couldn't tell them that it wasn't true, that everything I had written in my diary, which I had thought was private, was fiction, that I dreamed it all up. That would probably be just as bad, or worse.

But it makes no difference now. What matters is the blow the incident inflicted on me, the pain it caused me would later turn out to be but a foretaste, it planted a seed in me, it pointed me in the direction of my real trauma because I understood intuitively, my body understood that the incident was a ripple of an earlier one, that an earlier event lived inside me, but I had no insight into it, it was deliberately hidden from me yet at the same time it was known by me, I realise that what I felt were the aftershocks of a previous earthquake I had not yet registered.

Dad drunk and slumped on the bedroom floor with his back against the wardrobe: It isn't easy being human. Mum slamming the door in my face, the obvious triangle of which I was a part.

I told Helle and Unni that I'd decided to run a marathon in the spring and I had to train a lot.

The afternoon I heard dad tell Finn Lykke not to call again, I wanted to kill myself. I couldn’t bear the pain and the knowledge that I depended on and was controlled by those who inflicted the pain. I had to get away from the pain, I couldn’t bear it, it tortured me, I could endure it no longer and the only way out was death. If I had had any sleeping pills, I would have taken them, but I didn’t, had I known anyone who used drugs, I would have asked for an overdose, but I didn’t know anyone who did drugs. Sleeping pills or drugs would have been simple and painless while what was available to me, one of the sharpest knives in the kitchen drawer, the one used for slicing roast lamb on Sundays, would hurt a lot if I didn’t hit the right spot or stab myself hard enough. I lay in bed fantasising about the knife in the drawer on the other side of the wall, if I had had it in my room, then I would have done it, the temptation was so great, I longed to do it, stab my body right through my broken heart and be through with everything, with the pain, and so that I could show them what they had done to me: Look what you made me do! But mum was in the kitchen all day and dad was in the living room, there were people everywhere. So instead I went to throw myself in front of a tram, I ran up to Berg station to do it there, I was going to walk to the far end of the platform and throw myself in front of the tram just before it started to brake and it would be painless and over in a second. I got to the station and I hoped that the tram would come soon so that my courage wouldn’t fail me while I waited, then my Norwegian teacher appeared in the darkness, saw me, came up and said how strange that she should bump into me just now because she had been marking essays at college and she had read my essay about my favourite time of the year, winter, she said, and it worried her, she said, yes, it had shaken her, she said, but more importantly it had made her think, she said, and she had started to wonder if there might be a link between excitement and bitterness, had I ever considered that? I shook my head slowly. But I wrote well, she said, I had a way with words, she said, I ought to know that, a way with words so skilled that I might one day make my living from it. The tram arrived, my teacher boarded it, I stayed where I was, I walked away, I took a long detour, but in the end I went home, to them.

They still don’t know that what I wrote in my secret diary wasn’t true, that it was made up, a fantasy, but it no longer matters.

The effect of my first fiction, however, and the horror it caused taught me a life lesson: fiction can have a greater impact than the truth, and be more truthful.

Forty-eight years later in a small cabin in Nordmarka in the dark month of November the incident came back to me unexpectedly, with surprising intensity and with an astonishing level of detail I thought I had forgotten long ago. It wanted to tell me something, but what?

I hadn’t thought about the episode for a long time, for years, I had put it behind me. I guess I had alluded to it in a few novels, those that were closely related to my own life, but only in passing and mainly as an amusing anecdote with the emphasis on Finn Lykke’s comment about how he had now made a woman of me, if I remember rightly, I didn’t have the novels in the cabin and so I couldn’t check. But, I remembered now and felt myself go red, hadn’t I told a shorter version of the story late one night in the bar at a literature festival in Tromsø some months earlier? Hadn’t I made people laugh with my tale of a young woman’s exaggerated expectations of losing her virginity and a young man’s ambition to perform, the way I had sometimes told the story decades earlier, back when I spoke to young people more often than I do now? While drunk I had presented the story about Finn Lykke as a comedy late one night in the bar at a literature festival in Tromsø as entertainment and by doing that had I somehow resurrected it in myself? And was the young woman I had once been and who lived in me still, protesting at my version, frustrated that not even her future self was taking her seriously? The young woman I had once been insisted on the magnitude of the incident, how far-reaching and defining it had been, not just for her, but also for her family because of the seed it had sown and watered. And how wrong it was that it had never been mentioned

since or referenced, that it should cease to exist, that she, the young woman I once was, was expected to act as if it had never happened and would never tell anyone about it, not even her siblings – especially not them – even though or precisely because they were indirectly implicated? And how wrong had it been that it could not be discussed with those she had experienced it with either, presumably because it was too telling, it revealed too much, it pointed to a much bigger secret because ultimately the real secret wasn't my diary.

However, I didn't know that forty-eight years ago when I was still ignorant of my own history and our explosive triangle, and so the anguish that followed in the wake of the incident was incomprehensible to me and thus far more unmanageable than if I'd understood its cause. I never told anyone, not Unni, not Helle, not my siblings, it could and must not be mentioned and nor did I, probably because if I had, I might indirectly have revealed something far worse.

I was expected to keep quiet and I met that expectation the way young people strive to meet their parents' expectations lest they be punished, and besides my parents had just taught me a lesson in the kind of pain they were capable of inflicting on me.

Nor as I grew older, when I turned eighteen, nineteen, twenty, did I tell anyone, and I never thought to ask my parents how they had experienced that strange night in November, ask them why my father had got so drunk and uttered those enigmatic words, and what he had meant by this unexpected and borderline Strindbergian statement: It isn't easy being human. I didn't ask because I already knew, although I didn't know that I knew. All three of us knew.

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And so it never occurred to me, not then or in the years that followed, to confront my mother about her looking for, finding and reading my private diary. Because that wasn't the real issue, that wasn't the crime, the real crime was something else and it was not to be touched on by any of us, besides I had already been found guilty. I felt a strong sense of guilt.

The incident came back to me with intensity and vivid details, my mother's glasses askew on her nose, her night-time smell, her dressing gown, my father in his socks stumbling down the passage supported by my mother, to spark compassion for the young woman I once was and to show me the enormous impact it had on me as someone for whom writing is a means of self-expression. I stopped writing my diary, I lost my most private space and once I was unable to continue my discourse with myself, I also lost my most precious aid for calming myself down, the soothing sensation of disappearing and yet the quivering sense of coming alive that writing created. When I wrote afterwards, and I only wrote when I *had* to write, at college or when I did my homework at home, my parents were mentally present in my room and their suspicious eyes followed my pen and so I chose my words with care. And if I got stuck on a piece of homework because I couldn't find neutral words and phrases, I would go for a long run with the homework tucked under my top against my stomach in order to forget it, and when I came back to my room I would read it as if it hadn't been written by me. I edited and weeded out anything I thought contained traces of me, I wrote and amended as if I were under surveillance and could be punished for my words, and I could. I hadn't forgotten what my Norwegian teacher had told me at Berg station that evening I had gone there to end my pain, about the possible link between bitterness and excitement and that I might be able to make a living from my way with words. It had made me turn back and go home. And now it helped me again. I had saved my teacher's words in my heart for the future possibility that I might be able to make a living from my pen, but the potential link between bitterness and excitement helped me in the immediate. I eradicated in all my homework anything redolent of bitterness or excitement, I always chose

essay questions that were about debating an issue, the case for and against disarmament, for and against the European Community, and in time I developed methods to trick my monitors, a coded language that allowed me to express what was in my heart and on my mind without them being able to detect it. But it was a long and circumstantial process and it took years to develop the method and to discover what was in my heart and on my mind.

I was very low for the rest of that dark November. I continued to despair all through the dark, dreadful, familiar December and the rest of that incredibly long, cold and dark winter, I bore it all alone. My parents did what they always did, they behaved as they always had, they focused their attention on my siblings, especially the two younger ones as you'd expect. My parents seemed unaffected – apart from their avoiding me because my presence reminded them of that awful November night, would be my guess, and because they could see that I was glum and didn't want to be infected by my gloom, perhaps my mere presence also induced a kind of guilt in them. It was two against one, was how I took it, I alone had to bear our shared experience which bound us and our destinies together.

They must have talked about what happened that strange night in November 1975, talked to each other about the thing I had no one to talk to about. My mother must have wondered why my father was so distressed after reading my diary, why he was so upset that he went out and got drunk and came home plastered and sobbing and said that *it wasn't easy being human*, why would he do that? My mother must have thought this a bizarre reaction to my writing, irrespective of how crude it was, and I can't check how crude it was because I tore it to pieces and flushed it down the loo that same night. But my mother must surely have thought my father's reaction to my diary shocking given how distant, indeed how noticeably distant, he was with me compared to my younger sisters. *It isn't easy being human*. The words my father spoke that November night in 1975 are perfectly true and the most beautiful I ever heard him say. A declaration of vulnerability from a man I

thought of as invulnerable, as a winner and a fixer who I'd never seen cry before, whose face had never once betrayed that he found life complicated or challenging. Oh, leave the girl alone was also fine, it revealed an appreciation of my situation and if anyone understood it, it was certainly him. He knew something about me of which I was not yet conscious, he knew something my mother didn't know for sure, but which she feared, her fear drove her to torment me and he could see it. Oh, leave the girl alone.

My mother was afraid something had happened to me, my father was afraid it might come out, both of them were fearful but separately and in different ways, but then something unexpected happened in that dark month of November and my mother had her fears confirmed, and surely they must have talked about it at some point, or maybe not – precisely for that reason?

If after that strange incident that night in November, my mother had asked my father about the thing she feared, he would probably have dismissed it with a: How could you think that of me? And my mother would have shut up because my father was the boss and she depended on him. But she would have been aware of that already so there was no point in her asking, and so she didn't ask. But even if she had asked nevertheless because she couldn't help herself, because she couldn't control her emotions, and if my father against her expectations had replied honestly and confirmed her worst fear, what would she have done about it? Divorced him? It was impossible, she couldn't have coped, four children and no education, no money, impossible, report him to the police, even more impossible. And that, too, she would have known already so she didn't ask, ultimately she did possess some self-control when it was a question of survival and so she didn't ask.

But what if some time later when the dust had settled, perhaps a quiet Saturday evening when the children were in bed and they'd had some wine and the drama of that November night had faded into the distance, what if she had asked him and done so by opening the conversation as follows:

Now tell me everything, I promise that it will stay between us and that I won't leave you, is it possible that he might have given her an honest answer? And that they might then have agreed to put it behind them, never mention it again and act as if it had never happened because that was the simplest way forward for everyone, including me? Yes, it is possible, but not likely because even if they had agreed to put it behind them, not to mention it ever again, my father could never be sure that my mother would keep her promise because my mother was volatile and situations might arise in the future, conflicts between them where she might want to leverage her knowledge in order to impose her will in other respects. And my father wasn't foolish enough to hand her a weapon that might one day be used against him. However, what makes it most unlikely is that they were so young and so inexperienced in articulating their feelings, and because in those days people didn't talk about such things or voice challenging and distressing issues, on the contrary, it was the norm to stay silent and bottle things up, silence was a virtue. But later, many years later, when their children had left home and they were on their own in the big house to which the family moved a few months after the incident, when they had weathered a lot of drama and been on the verge of divorce, but ended up reconciling and staying married, then it might have happened and probably in a way that was healing and restorative for both of them.

It may well have happened one evening after they had had some wine and the strange November night from all those years ago came back, and my mother asked, but swore before she asked that she would never leave him no matter what he said because they were old, lifelong companions now, they had been through a lot the two of them, and she had come to terms with it somehow and anyway she already knew, and he knew that she knew. Then my father told her, not everything and not in detail, but enough for my mother to learn the landscape in which she had been living and in which she was living now, and in which landscape my father had been living and in which he was living now, and that made each person's actions

understandable to the other. So it was a relief to both of them and it was a gift from him to her because then her fears and hysteria about me had not been irrational or baseless. It was a statistical fact and well known, even then, that people who had experienced what I had experienced were more likely to drink and become sexually active sooner than their peers. So my father's confession transformed my mother from a hysterical and neurotic woman into a relatively sensible one, and at the same time it explained my father's: Oh, leave the girl alone, something that my mother had interpreted as a criticism at the time. Yes, it is highly likely that at some point or other they had had a decisive, relatively honest conversation about what the family had been like back when they lived on the first floor of Grøndals vei, before they moved to the smart address on the upper side of Tåsenveien, and thus they became co-conspirators. They shared a secret which they had a mutual interest in keeping, and they promised each other never to reveal it by word or gesture, and that was good and fostered a sense of unity, and I imagine peace and harmony descended now that this unspoken issue no longer hung over them. The bomb had been defused, but it had been a controlled explosion and their fears subsided, it was a weight off their minds. But they could never be truly safe as long as I lived because the past might rise from my subconscious to my conscious mind as I grew older, and then what? After their liberating, conciliatory and unifying conversation, I became the unexploded bomb. And in the years that followed, I noticed their growing unease towards me. I felt it, but I didn't understand it because in contrast to my opponents, whose fate and mine were tied together, I didn't know the landscape in which I was living. They held the keys to my unhappiness, to what had already happened and to what was coming, but they never gave me those keys to help me understand it. They didn't help me and that is understandable because it would have endangered them. They didn't want to enlighten me or shine a light on my landscape and so they never initiated me into their knowledge, which was crucial to me, and so I had to do the challenging work myself and alone. They watched me nervously, they avoided and feared and shunned me. I made my debut as a writer, with a children's book, fortunately, they liked that, but they never

said that they were proud of me or praised me in order not to encourage an activity they feared, they read what I wrote with trepidation, I gathered, I sensed but didn't understand their obvious ambivalence, it is only now that I realise how scared they must have been that the unspeakable would peek out from the printed pages that could be read by anyone. How they must have trembled as they leafed through my new publications, looking for signs of what my mother had constantly been looking out for when I was young, but now in a totally different way. And how relieved they must have been when they didn't find what they were looking for. But even if they didn't find anything explicit, I wonder if they thought they detected traces and hints, and what if a few alert readers put two and two together? How anxious they must have been with family and friends should my writing come up in conversation, and how relieved they must have been when no one appeared to put two and two together, my poor, long-suffering parents always on tenterhooks. They read me, I believe, although they rarely mentioned it. My father never mentioned it at all, my mother would mention it occasionally, usually by repeating a critical remark made by someone else. Still, I am guessing they read my work, I can't be sure of course, but I think it likely that they read me, scared and defensive, and noticed how book by book my language and my voice moved away from their supervision, that I no longer corrected my texts with their imaginary red pen, and their fear that the unexploded bomb might go off increased. But at least they had already agreed that should it ever happen, then they would stick together and deny any allegations I might make. That must have been good for them.

Will you never let it go? No. I repeat and recall and relive and retell and redress because childhood lasts, youth lasts, our childhood and youth constitute a future that starts over constantly, it is an ongoing process. I home in on it again and again because the body remembers and suffers and thinks, the body knows, it is not just the mind. The mind will hit a wall and when I write, I chip away at it, that is why I write, I work on the wall to

discover what parts have substance and significance, yes, I rewrite and I reproduce like Munch painted several versions of *The Scream*, I repeat and I vary the repetition, shamelessly, with my heart on my sleeve and suffering inevitable heartburn in order to process and understand and put it behind me or to reinforce the bitterness and excitement inside me, in order to change myself through repeating and varying patterns, I summon up my mother, I summon up my father, I summon up my parents, those two pathetic figures whom I loved because who else would I love, I was never indifferent to them and they were not indifferent to me, a symbiotic relationship, but they were also frightened of me and so they should be.

They braced themselves. For the subconscious to make itself known and become conscious in me as I grew up and moved away from them and they lost their influence and control over me. They feared I might seek out specialist help that would put me on the right track and lead me to understand myself better, they feared I would read the new novels being published about the experience that inhabited me. And I opened those books, but quickly put them away because I didn't think they measured up in terms of being good literature, I said, that was obviously another clue. I'm guessing my parents feared what my nightmares would end up revealing and possibly also the telltale slips of my pen and tongue and my increasingly explicit themes, to the extent they understood such psychological processes. But above all they feared my writing because they could see – and long before I, the ignorant one, could – how book by book I got dangerously closer to the real but unspeakable issue. Did I have to write so much about sex, my mother said, people were talking about it, how I seemed to court controversy just to get attention, she said, did I have to write so much about drinking, she asked, several people had remarked on it, how I seemed to enjoy being outrageous, it was childish, she said, but I could sense her fear, the old, familiar fear. It no longer bothered me quite so much though her words still stung, but her fear and my pain suggested and provided me with new puzzle pieces for the finished picture, she helped me

without knowing it. My parents feared my writing and they were right to do so because it was my writing that brought about the breakthrough. The fits of pain I suffered in the aftermath of simple writing tasks pointed to it and when I fainted after writing a particular passage, once the pain that followed the fainting fit had subsided, I read what I had written and I saw that it didn't say what I had meant to say about a sexual encounter between a man and a woman, that he touched her like a doctor, I had written that he touched her like a father. And the images came flooding in, unbearable images shot like electric shocks through my brain, lightning-clear and with the force of several thousand volts, and everything fell into place, my mind imploded and I have never been the same since.

They braced themselves. They read me with increasing fear and they braced themselves.

The adult daughter summons the family to a meeting and makes shocking allegations about the father; the father shakes his head, horrified, looks at his other adult children and says: Do you really think I could do something like that?

It is his word against hers because there is no evidence.

But as they braced themselves for the worst-case scenario, a brutal and dramatic showdown, they realised that the worst-case scenario would never happen, that their fear was unfounded because none of their other children would believe the oldest daughter. Because if they chose to believe her – and it would be a choice – a big, black, hungry hole would open up right in front of them. Could they still celebrate their father's birthday, celebrate Christmas like they used to, celebrate Easter as usual and could their mother stay married to their father? And should the rest of the family be told, their extended family and neighbours, and since surely it was a serious matter, indeed a crime, should they contact the police? If they chose to believe the oldest daughter – because it would be a choice – an ocean of impossibility

would open up, the family would implode and that would be the end of the family, but if they chose to believe the father, the family could go on, they could celebrate Christmas and Easter and their father's birthday and no one would have to be told and no one would have to contact the police and their parents could stay married. Choosing to believe their father was saving the family and its future, possibly with one unfortunate side effect, the regrettable, unintended consequence that they would be sacrificing the oldest daughter, but that was a small price to pay compared to the black hole, and anyway she was already lost, in recent years her presence had caused nothing but grief.

I sat in a cabin in Nordmarka and imagined how my parents had had a reassuring conversation about that which I could discuss with no one. I imagined their enormous relief when they realised that the danger had probably passed, that they no longer needed to be on high alert. But then other images of the two of them appeared in my mind, each sitting in a green, high-backed chair, images of all the long evenings that followed the evening when they had had their reassuring conversation about how to handle that strange November night if what it had hinted at should ever come up. I zoomed in and could see that they seemed glum and silent as they sat in their separate chairs, so alone. Because what they had agreed, even if they had done so out of necessity, wasn't it also a kind of sin, an offence against their daughter, their own flesh and blood, as the saying goes? Yes, I thought I could see it in their faces, how what they had agreed upon and what had initially been a source of relief in time began to trouble them. Except they could not bring it up again because a choice like that can't be unmade, it was sealed and buried, and neither of them could bear the painful, unpleasant work involved in unearthing it in order to re-examine it. I zoomed in on each of them in their green, high-backed chairs in front of the flickering television and I saw that they were monosyllabic and morose. Was it because they carried a numbing feeling of guilt, but in different ways and separately? Because my father might well, I think from

what I knew of him and I knew him in my own particular way, feel a kind of respect for me, for the independence I exhibited, my enterprising nature, for managing financially without help. It wouldn't surprise me, but perhaps it is wishful thinking on my part that from time to time he might tell himself: She takes after me in that way, my oldest daughter, the one we don't talk about. But he couldn't say that to my mother. While my mother, who had always been and still was financially dependent on my father, sensed his secret respect for the self-sufficiency of the daughter they never talked about, her resolve, a quality my mother lacked and so he didn't respect her in the same way and that enraged her, but she couldn't express her rage because of the shame she felt. She had promised to stick with her husband for better and for worse, and my father was grateful for her gift, but it wasn't admirable from a societal perspective, and she knew it, they both knew it, they sat in their high-backed chairs with thoughts they could not share because then everything would become impossible, so they kept silent about their troubles and they were both tied to the mast, but not to the same mast.

I could see it now, how exhausting it must have been for them long-term. But to begin with it was just a relief.

Their fears subsided, mine grew, I was alone in the mute darkness. And I, your mature self, wasn't there for you, I wasn't there that terrible November night or during the cold dark winter that followed or the too bright, dazzling spring which arrived as it always did even though my world order had been upended and the revealing spring light skewered me, it shone through me and there was nothing I could do about it, it pierced me in order to highlight and examine my most private self without permission, nights so bright there was nowhere to hide, everything bared and exposed, and I, your mature self, wasn't there and couldn't encourage you or comfort you and didn't understand the depth of your pain, the totality of your pain, didn't know that such mental and physical anguish existed, caused by the words, actions and

attitudes of your guardians, and I didn’t hear it until now, forty-eight years later, forty-eight years overdue, the cry from the young woman I once was, directed at me, she was crying out to her mature self, she had been calling out to me for decades: Talk to me! Comfort me! Offer me your hand of salvation, throw me a lifeline, pull me up! I didn’t hear her calls, her desperate pleas then, but I hear them now, they echo in my brain and they won’t ever stop.

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She didn’t understand – because how could she? – that what she experienced when she was sixteen were the aftershocks of an earlier, unacknowledged earthquake. And if anyone had told her, if I, her mature self, had told her, she would not have been able to cope because seeing as she barely survived the aftershocks, when she grew ill and came close to being crushed to death by them, she would not have survived remembering and reliving the actual earthquake back at the time she suffered so terribly, it could have killed her, I know this because I, her mature self, don’t have the strength either, I, too, am scared.

There is a grief, an experience of pain which is also shameful, they chased me away and then they blamed me for leaving.

A dark November night alone in a wooden cabin in Nordmarka, the darkness is salty, I tremble from the cold night-time truths that have washed over me and I call out my name, my hard name, repeatedly while the dog paws the snow and digs its way through it to the earth, and it carries on digging and scraping away the earth with eager or desperate paws, with its claws, it digs as if it is digging for dear life or for dogs that lived there long ago, deep in the darkness, and then she arrives, sixteen years old, she stands barefoot in the snow outside the terrace door and I had forgotten what she looked like, so pale, but then again it was November, so thin, but then again she had stopped eating, so tongue-tied, but then again she had stopped speaking and writing, she stands outside the terrace door, freezing, alone and orphaned, and yet I am afraid to let her in, then I open the door anyway

and she enters in the nightdress she used to wear, the one with the blue floral pattern, it reaches almost to the floor, I had forgotten it. The mystery isn’t the ways of the world, but the fact that the world exists at all. She steps inside and walks past me and doesn’t close the door behind her, but leaves it open to the cold November night, and I don’t want to walk past her in order to close it, she is so delicate, almost transparent as she stands there, quivering. I put my arms around her, she lets herself be held and our embrace suspends time, the mathematics and the mechanics in my watch cease to apply because this is not a point on a line or a circle, but a moment, deep, rich, infinite and complex.